

Religious Communities *of* and *for* the Kingdom of God

George M. Soares-Prabhu's Vision of Priesthood and Religious Life

Introduction

George M. Soares-Prabhu's Christology is a dialogue between the Text that emerged from a particular situation of a thirst for liberation (Biblical) and the Context (of Indian Third World) that too thirsts for liberation. He was a scholarly person with the "concern for the poor and fascination for the person of Jesus" (*CWG* 4, xi). The Christology of Soares-Prabhu is a story that "explicates the central symbol 'Jesus of Faith' in terms of his ministry, death and resurrection" (Lobo, 2005: 346). Soares-Prabhu asserts that this story is to be re-narrated in the context of cry-for-life situation of Indian Third World. According to Soares-Prabhu India's cry for life is a cry for survival, a cry for dignity and affirmation, and a cry for recognition and meaning. It is a cry for liberation and dialogue (*CWG* 4, 276). India shares the massive economic poverty of the Third World, pluriform religiosity of life in Asia, but the caste discrimination is specific to India alone. Poverty-Religiosity-Caste constitute India's *samsara*, its cycle of bondage (*CWG* 4, 173). The Caste-ridden Church in India and particularly the consecrated persons have to respond to the challenges of abject poverty and pluriform religiosity. Soares-Prabhu points to the central theme of Jesus' ministry, namely, the Kingdom of God as a roadmap for the Church in India in general, and in particular for the consecrated, to respond to these challenges and create a New Society based on the Kingdom values, namely Freedom, Fellowship and Justice.

Soares-Prabhu points out that though Jesus did not provide a blueprint for the Church, he had a vision of a new society (*CWG* 4, 223) - based on Freedom, Fellowship and Justice. This vision was drawn from his own experience of the unconditionally loving God as Abba. It is this revelation of God as Abba that is the true content of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom (*CWG* 4, 223). In his various writings, Soares-Prabhu would point out that Jesus' mission of realizing the Kingdom of God has been handed over to the religious in India. In this article we shall explore Soares-Prabhu's pointers to the Priests and Religious to carry out effectively Jesus' Mission of the Kingdom of God. We shall first look at Jesus' Vision and Mission of the Kingdom of God the Abba as articulated by Soares-Prabhu. Jesus the Prophet, Priest and Pastor shows us the Agape Marga through His method of Liberative Pedagogy. We shall also show that Jesus invites us to follow His Liberative Pedagogy to carry out His project Kingdom of God. The Church in India in general and the Priests and Religious in particular could follow the Agape Marga of Jesus in order to carry out the Kingdom Mission, through an integrated response that entails living out their identity as the 'Contrast Community' and their profession as 'Prophetic Communities' *of* and *for* the Kingdom of God.

1. God as Abba: The Foundation of Jesus' Vision and Mission of the Kingdom of God

The starting point of the Christology of Soares-Prabhu is the Abba experience of

Jesus that he translated in his way of Agape. His Christology can be summarized in terms of the questions that he asks and the answers he seeks to give to these questions from the perspective of the cry for life situation in the Indian Third World. All throughout his writings he poses questions such as: What does Jesus Christ mean to India in its cultural diversity, its massive poverty and its flourishing religiosity? What is the role of Jesus Christ in Christian theology that will respond effectively to India's cry for life? What is Jesus'Abba experience? How did Jesus perceive the Kingdom? Did Jesus have a vision of a new society? Did his eschatological consciousness, dominated by the expectation of an imminent irruption of God's reign, envisage a new society at all? What was the teaching of Jesus like? What sort of educational model did he follow? (CWG 4, 252).

Soares-Prabhu claims that 'Kingdom of God' is an expression characteristic of Jesus, expressing his own particular consciousness of mission and his own personal experience of God. The expression 'Kingdom of God' or its equivalent 'Kingdom of the Heavens' appears about 90 times in the synoptic Gospels as against to be found rarely in the OT literature and only a few times in other NT writings and that too almost always in the sayings of Jesus (CWG 4, 226). According to the Christological vision of Soares-Prabhu the ultimate truth that Jesus came to teach us is the Kingdom of God based on Jesus'Abba experience.

The basic religious experience of Jesus, that which empowers his whole life and mission and calls into being and sustains the Jesus movement, is his experience of God as unconditional love. Jesus experiences God as a loving Father and dares to address him as *abba* (Mt 14:36). ... In no Jewish prayer is God ever addressed as *abba*. The usage of Jesus is therefore unique and points to a new and unique experience of God as unutterably intimate and close (CWG 4, 181).

By virtue of his Abba experience, Jesus insists on establishing the Truth of the

Kingdom of God. God as the unconditionally loving Abba is the foundational experience of Jesus (CWG 1, 11). Basing himself on his Abba experience, Jesus practiced and taught others to experience every human being as our loving brother and sister. The reason of Jesus' radical openness towards all humankind, and relationship with all humans as brothers and sisters, "is rooted in his radical experience of God as Abba, because to experience God as 'Father' implies that we experience all human beings as brothers and sisters who have a claim on our acceptance and our love. The dharma of Jesus - his understanding of existence and his way of life - is a dharma of unconditional and therefore of absolutely universal love" (CWG 3,167). The Kingdom of God derived from his core experience of God as Abba is the authentic Dharma of Jesus (CWG 4, 258), which announces freedom, fellowship and justice as its values (CWG 4, 224). The parameters of the Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed are freedom, fellowship and justice that lead to Agape, the ultimate Love (CWG 4, 238-44). Jesus' foundational experience of God as Abba mediated by him "brings freedom or personal liberation because it sets a person free from the compulsions and fears that inhibit him or her" (CWG 3,154). This freedom in turn "leads to a fellowship of mutual concern. Born of an experience of unconditional love, the freedom of the Kingdom empowers and impels the free man to surrender his freedom in love" (CWG 4, 154). It is because of this freedom, there is genuine fellowship and as a result "justice will flourish" (CWG 3,155).

2. Jesus' Marga is Agape Marga

The Dharma of Jesus is the Dharma of Sonship which implies a fraternity of humankind, and gives rise to Dharma of concern (Agape) (CWG 4, 167). Jesus' Marga is Agape Marga (CWG 4, 217-18). that is characterized by loving relationship with fellow human beings. Jesus' communion with the untouchables of his society was a proclamation in action,

powerfully announcing the wholly unconditional character of the Father's love (*CWG 4*, 255). Jesus came to lead us to the reality of the Kingdom of God based on his Abba experience. Jesus takes the Agape Marga to lead us to that truth. By virtue of his Abba experience, Jesus insists on establishing the Truth of the Kingdom of God. He experienced God as the unconditionally loving Abba. Basing himself on the Abba experience, he practiced and taught others to experience every human being as our loving brother and sister based on the authentic Dharma of Sonship that Jesus followed (*CWG 4*, 258). The Dharma of Jesus - his Agape Marga - gives a strong revolutionary thrust to the vision of the family of humankind, which calls for the commitment to build a genuinely fraternal community with its own inner dynamism to oppose all social, economic, political or religious structures which hinder the emergence of such a community (*CWG 4*, 169).

According to Soares-Prabhu the Marga Jesus follows is "not the way of spiritual insight (*jnana-marga*), not the way of ritual observance (*karma marga*), nor even the way of mystical devotion (*bhakti marga*); it is way of concern (agape)" (*CWG 3*, 65). The uniqueness of Jesus Christ consists of the fact that he is the incarnation of Love. Jesus sums up his ethic in a love commandment according to which, to love God means, concretely, to love neighbour. Jesus' Agape is effective love that responds to the needs of people (*CWG 3*, 8). Jesus subordinates both law and cult to love. The way of Jesus is not the way of ritual observance in the cultic sense, but it is the way of concern (Agape). The scribes in Jesus' time believed that an action was meritorious only when it was commanded by law (*CWG 3*, 65). Jesus on the other hand taught his love commandment: Love of God *is* Love of Neighbour (see Mt 22:37-39). Jesus' way is not ritual centred like in Hinduism or in the Jewish tradition, neither is it exclusively God centred. It is rather Self-Neighbour-God ex-

centred. It is not conventional love of God expressed through rituals and sacrifices and following meticulously the letter of the law. Loving God means for Jesus loving the neighbour with concern and doing good to the neighbour. That is Agape. It is precisely by loving one's neighbour as oneself that one truly loves God with all one's heart. It is the meeting of the three loves, namely Self-Neighbour-God. The true form of the love commandment of Jesus is that we 'love God *in* the neighbour' (*CWG 3*, 65-71).

3. Jesus as the Priest, Prophet and Pastor

The Agape Marga of Jesus - the Dharma of concern - inspires one to respond to the cry of the exploited and oppressed by engaging in action for the removal of structures of untruth that are responsible for exploitation and oppression. In an unjust, unfree and untrue society Agape inevitably becomes a struggle for justice, freedom and truth and strives to set free the oppressed (*CWG 4*, 119). The Agape Marga has been trodden by Jesus in threefold ways: He lives in 'Solidarity with God's People', 'Challenges the unjust Structures of the Society', and 'Teaches with Gentleness and Compassion.' Jesus lives out this mission of Agape as the Priest, Prophet and Pastor.

3.1. Jesus the Priest in Solidarity with God's People

Soares-Prabhu shows that "Jesus appears in the Gospels as non-clerical, even as a somewhat anti-clerical figure. He is not a priest, for he does not belong to a priestly family; and he is shown in continuing conflict with the priestly establishment which ultimately arranges for his death" (*CWG 2*, 222). But at the same time, we see in Jesus the priestly characteristics in the New Testament. The NT proclaims Jesus as the one mediator between God and humankind (1 Tim 2:5), someone like a son of man dressed in priestly vestments (Rev 1:13), the Paschal Lamb (Jn 1:29; 19:36; 1 Cor 5:7; Rev 5:9), offering sacrifice of his blood for expiation for many for the new

covenant (Mk 14:24 Rom 3:25) (*CWG* 2, 223).

Soares-Prabhu speaks of Jesus as the priest in solidarity with God's people, the poor and the oppressed. The oppressed are not just a pitiable group of unfortunates; they are the key axis upon which the history of the Bible unfolds itself, both in the Old Testament (Exodus experience) and in the New Testament (Jesus' option for the oppressed). Thus, the oppressed are not the passive victims of history but those through whom God shapes the history (*CWG* 2, 264-67). Soares-Prabhu states that in response to oppression Jesus identifies himself with the poor, in order to show them an active and effective concern. Such a concern looks to the ending of their social poverty, while calling for a spiritual poverty that will set them and their rich exploiters free from mammon, the compulsive urge to possess. Jesus identified with the poor by being poor himself, by allowing poor among his followers and by choosing his mission field where there were the poor (*CWG* 4, 254). Jesus' solidarity with the poor and his unique divine Sonship constituted him a perfect priest; and his compassion for humankind and his perfect obedience to God's will existentially lived out in his life and ministry and radically manifested in his passion, death and exaltation constituted a perfect once for all sacrifice by which humankind is definitively reconciled with God on the one hand and all other sacrifices reddened obsolete on the other (*CWG* 2, 223-25). As against the holiness code of the Old Testament which defined holiness in terms of 'separation' from the world and the 'otherness' of God (*CWG* 1, 229), for Jesus 'holiness' meant not 'separation' but 'mercy'. He demonstrates this definition in his table fellowship with the polluted tax collectors and sinners, lepers and unclean woman etc. This characteristic of Jesus makes him a Priest different from the OT priests (*CWG* 1, 231).

3.2. Jesus the Prophet Proclaiming the Kingdom of God

The Jesus image that the gospels portray is of a Jesus who was more Prophet than Priest or King. But as Soares-Prabhu shows, Jesus was different from other Biblical prophets in the sense that while the power of the Spirit enthused the prophets in a functional way, it enthused Jesus in an ontological manner. His teaching was the communication of an experience of love - His Abba experience. This profound experience of the love of God transformed Jesus into an extraordinary free person; he was not greedy, ambitious or possessive; he was not afraid of the Law or the religious authorities of his time; he seemed to care little for the public opinion; associated freely with the outcasts and seemed to be free even of family ties. Jesus radically transformed the understanding of ethics, from being a law based to a love-based form of life (*CWG* 3, 3-12).

The spirituality of Jesus is derived from his experience of God's unconditional love "the love which drives him to identification with the poor and the freedom which allows him to confront the rich both derive from this foundational experience of God as Abba" (*CWG* 3, 98). The Abba experience of Jesus makes the person take a prophetic stand as it happened in the case of Jesus as "this experience cannot tolerate any form of discrimination based on race, religion, community or gender; nor can it remain passive in the face of the unjust structures that deprive people of what they need to lead a fully human life, for it is always a brother or sister who is hurt by such discrimination or injustice" (*CWG* 3, 98). Jesus takes sides "in his sharply polarised society, clearly, divided into economic and social classes with conflicting interests" by identifying with "the poor and the outcast, and he confronts the 'establishment' which impoverishes and rejects them" (*CWG* 3, 93). Jesus' "proclamation of humankind as the 'family of God' wholly excludes all forms of racist, sexist, ethnic or caste discrimination. His demand for a radical

concern for the ‘neighbour’ calls for a rejection of any system which creates or enhances an unjust distribution of wealth, status or power” (CWG 3, 96).

3.3. *The Liberative Pedagogy of Jesus the Pastor*

In the writings of Soares-Prabhu, we also come across the image of Jesus as Pastor. Soares-Prabhu speaks of the liberative pedagogy of Jesus (CWG 4,252-66). The pedagogy of Jesus was liberative in a double way, making people “conscious of their worth as children of one Father in heaven” and “freeing them from the manipulative myths which legitimized their oppressive and alienating society” (CWG 4,263). His teaching is open to the little ones, unlearned in the law and the tax collectors and sinners who have no moral or religious standing whatever. He speaks to them the language they would easily understand because “the teaching of Jesus is not the imparting of doctrine but the communication of love” (CWG 4, 255). With many parables Jesus “spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything” (CWG 4, 261). Jesus taught the poor and the rejected of the society. The mission field of Jesus with the only exception of the holy land of Jerusalem was the Palestinian country side with its poor, backward villages and its primitive townships, not the Hellenized urban centres to which the rich flocked (CWG 4,254).

Soares-Prabhu affirms that at the heart of Jesus’ mission there is the intention of the creation of a new humanity. His idea of liberation avoids two simplistic extremes. He is against a spirituality which tolerates injustice and exploitation in the name of an eschatological reward - a pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die; (CWG 4, 184-85). on the other hand, a materialistic reduction of social forces is not acceptable to him either. Thus, liberation according to Soares-Prabhu is this worldly, contemporary affair, a new social order where there will be neither poor nor rich. It will be the movement “through a

change of heart (freedom from fear and greed, freedom for fellowship and universal concern) and a *change of structures* (the removal of social, economic and political systems of exploitation) to a fraternal, non-exploitative social order” (CWG 3,161). This is because Jesus himself intends to bring about “both a *change of heart* (freedom from attachment to riches) and a *change of structures* (liberation from oppressive social systems); for it is this combination alone that can lead to the new humanity which is the ultimate goal of the long process of total liberation that Jesus has begun” (CWG 2, 267).

4. *The Table Fellowship of Jesus*

The table fellowship of Jesus with the tax collectors and sinners was a revolutionary praxis (CWG 1,223) of Jesus who “presents a new experience of God and a new understanding of community, in which there can be no ‘outcasts’ - for God is experienced as a loving Parent, and every fellow Christian as a brother or a sister” (CWG 1, 234). Jesus demonstrates without doubt through his teachings and ministry that there are no outcasts before God and all belong to ‘the family of God’ (CWG 3, 9-10). Soares-Prabhu makes a scathing attack on the caste system that is prevalent in the Indian Church and reprimands us of our corporate sinfulness. The fact that there are Dalit Christians in India and they have to suffer by the Christians themselves is a sign of our sinfulness. In fact, the expression ‘Christian Dalit’ is a contradiction in terms, because there can be no ‘Dalit’ in a Christian community, for in Christ there is neither clean caste nor Dalit (CWG 1, 237). Jesus has shown it by his ‘acted parable’ of his table fellowship with the tax collectors and sinners, through which he brings home to listeners his experience of God as Abba the loving parent, and the ‘good news’ of liberation (CWG 1, 233).

The paradigm of the table fellowship of Jesus in our context of India where the other

and the no-one are the strong elements in our relationships is the right method to establish Dharma that Jesus envisaged. The consequence of the table fellowship of Jesus is his exaltation on the Cross (*CWG* 1, 223). They are mutually inseparable. It involves the breaking of bread and the breaking of our own selves with the other and the no-ones just as Jesus did. Jesus' table fellowship beckons us to include all in the Reign of God that he envisaged and that we want to proclaim and establish. We need to bind together all the divided people in one Eucharistic fellowship beyond the ethnic, linguistic and caste boundaries. It is also our task to make the no-ones as the loved ones of God. This needs to begin first with the Christians themselves as we Christians are divided among ourselves on the basis of caste, language and ethnicity. The next step would be to enter into the lives of the other and include them too in the table fellowship of Jesus with the single goal of giving to all the foretaste of the Reign of God.

5. Jesus' Invitation to be Prophetic Communities *of* and *for* the Kingdom of God

From the writings of Soares-Prabhu, we the Priests and Religious in India could take the following lessons for our Mission in India. The Mission of Jesus, namely the Kingdom of God becomes the responsibility of the Priests and Religious in India. In order to make Jesus' Mission become a reality, we are called to 'Follow the Agape Marga of Jesus the Way', in order to 'Build God's Family in India', 'Follow the Liberative Pedagogy of Jesus the Shepherd' and 'Be the Priests and Religious in Solidarity with the People of God', 'Be the Prophetic Communities *of* and *for* the Kingdom as Salt and Light', and 'Be the Contrast Community living our Identity as the Little Flock.'

5.1. Follow the Agape Marga of Jesus the Way

Soares-Prabhu shows the Agape Marga of Jesus as the Roadmap for Indian Religious.

According to him the Marga Jesus follows is Agape - the Way of concern (*CWG* 3, 65). Agape means effective love that responds "to the needs of the exploited and oppressed neighbour by engaging in action for the removal of structures that are responsible for such exploitation and oppression. In an unjust society *agape* inevitably becomes a struggle for justice: it strives to set free the oppressed" (*CWG* 4, 29119). Soares-Prabhu envisages such an Indian community of religious and priests that would engage in the Agape Marga by responding to the needs of the Indian masses suffering because of the unjust structures. Only way out of this rut is Agape - effective love, which "then, will respond to the needs of the exploited and oppressed neighbour by engaging in action for the removal of the structures that are responsible for such exploitation and oppression. In an unjust society *agape* inevitably becomes a struggle for justice" (*CWG* 4, 119). At the basis of this Marga is Jesus' experience of God as Abba which is passed on to his followers in India: "Ultimately then our *agape* is rooted in our experience of God as *Abba*; for to experience God as Father is to experience every human being as brother or sister. Our love for neighbour is a consequence of our experience of God's love for us" (*CWG* 4,122).

The Jesus community which emerged from and embodied the Abba experience of Jesus was characterized by the salient features such as, 'Radical Freedom', 'Radical Universalism', 'Radical Sharing', 'Radical Service' and 'Radical Equality'. This should become the archetypal community for all Christian communities (*CWG* 4, 143-48).

The Abba experience would help us religious to act with 'Radical Freedom' to commit ourselves to the cause of the Kingdom because this radical freedom is a freedom from our multiple alienation and "freedom for universal commitment. The experience of God as *abba* implies experiencing all human beings as brothers and sisters, and so rules out all discrimination on any ground

whatsoever” (CWG 4,145). This freedom comes from the experience of God’s unconditional love which frees us from our bondage to Mammon (greed, consumerism, ‘the concupiscence of the eyes’), and thereby we are able to form a community of ‘Radical Sharing’. Because this unconditional love frees us from the craving for power, (ambition, the need to dominate, ‘the pride of life’), we can form a community of ‘Radical Service’. (CWG 4, 146). Following the Agape Marga is a prophetic act challenging the structures of injustice, inequality and hatred and would make us a radically egalitarian community of ‘Radical Universalism’. Differences of race, class, and sex would not affect our basic relationship with Jesus nor our basic worth as human beings who are children of the one Father in heaven. We would become an authentic Jesus community of ‘Radical Equality’, which would not tolerate any form of stratification (racist or caste) which touches the intrinsic worth of a person (CWG 4, 147).

5.2. Priests as the Builders of God's Family

Soares-Prabhu’s method involves concerns such as the option for the poor, integral liberation of the individuals as well as the social structures and dialogue with religious traditions that would help evolve a more inclusive Christology and a more open theology of religions and a much less militant understanding of mission. It is with this concern and openness that Soares-Prabhu invites the priests and religious to get involved in the Indian reality. The priest/religious in India cannot limit themselves to build “closed and self-satisfied Christian communities, but must reach out to the creation of the eschatological human community (the new heaven and the new earth) which lies on the horizons of human and cosmic history (Rev 21:1-4)” (CWG 2, 238).

Soares-Prabhu insists that the “new understanding of priesthood” presented in the NT “must determine the shape of the Christian priesthood in India today” (CWG

2,215). The main task of the priest in India should be to work as “a community builder, whose concerns reach beyond the minuscule Christian community to which he belongs. He is called to represent, that is, to make present here and now, the one priesthood of Jesus through which all things have been reconciled to the Father. His concerns must be as large as the concerns of Jesus himself” who came to “establish the reign of God” by living out “a priesthood of self-giving into and in history, which reconciles all things to the Father and leads human and cosmic history to fulfillment” (CWG 2, 238).

Jesus’ Sonship is the source of his Dharma (CWG 4,165). The Dharma of Sonship implies a fraternity of humankind, and gives rise to Dharma of concern (Agape) (CWG 4, 165). The Lord’s Prayer is the crystallized form of his Dharma (Lobo, 2005: 396). This prayer invites us to reconciliation and sharing of bread, making us one family, encouraging us to work for *Lokasamgraha*, which is in fact the Dharma of Jesus. The Dharma of Jesus looks forward to building up of a universal and fraternal community of sharing and love (CWG 4, 169). Imitating Jesus, the priest today must enter into Jesus’ movement of the kingdom which continually subverts a world structured by relationships of oppression, violence, and exploitation; and replaces it by a new world structured on relationships of respect, freedom and love. Building such communities of the Kingdom (which in India will not be just narrowly institutionally Christian communities) is the primary task of the Christian priests who represent the saving priesthood of Jesus (CWG 2, 238-39).

Soares-Prabhu calls upon the priests today to make a shift from cultic priesthood to be the builders of the family of God. The cultic role of the priest, even though reaffirmed in the Council (LG 10) is not to be taken as his primary role. It is part of his mission to gather together “God’s family as a brotherhood of unity” (CWG 2, 238). The family of God which the priest builds is not a

closed, communal family. It is a family that is open to the world. Citing *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 6, Soares-Prabhu says that priests as the builders of the community are to be 'Alter Christus' who "exercise the office of Christ, the Head and Shepherd. Thus, they gather God's family together as a brotherhood (and sisterhood) of living unity, and lead it through Christ and in the Spirit to God the Father" (CWG 2, 238).

Soares-Prabhu is clear that the Catholic Priest should follow his call for service and not to exhibit his power, to build up the Christian and human community and not merely carrying out cultic function. He says:

The Christian priest is not a cultic functionary (a *hiereus*, a *pujari*) that is, a sacral person who has been consecrated to preside over the Eucharist or administer the sacraments. He is a pastor, that is, someone who has been officially charged with the building up of the Christian (and eventually the human) community, by making the saving work of Jesus effectively present to us through word, sign and style of life. Any cultic function that the priest exercises is at the service of his pastoral office. This pastoral function the Christian priest exercises as a 'ministry', that is an act of service, not a manifestation of skill, of status or of power (CWG 2, 234).

5.3. Follow the Liberative Pedagogy of Jesus

Soares-Prabhu speaks of the Liberative Pedagogy of Jesus and invites the priests and religious in India to follow the same Pedagogy to teach the message of the Kingdom. He stresses the need for integral liberation but especially for liberation from social oppression. This is possible only if we follow the Pedagogy of Jesus. Jesus identified himself with the poor in order to show them an active and effective concern - namely His Agape experience. Such an approach will enable the priests and religious in India to reach out to the peripheries and thus include all in the project Kingdom of God.

Jesus' vision of a new society is an unfinished task handed over to his followers in pursuit of establishing the Kingdom of God. It is not the goal but the way that invites us to realize the values of the Kingdom. It is a ceaseless struggle against the demonic structures of injustice, unfreedom and untruth erected by mammon. It is a task left by Jesus for us his followers to involve ourselves in the permanent revolution of establishing the Kingdom of Truth as envisioned by Jesus. It is a task to strive for genuine fellowship, for justice and for freedom. The radical concern for the Kingdom, inspired by the revolutionary Christ, will not tolerate passivity in the face of social, economic and political structures which oppress and dehumanize (CWG 4, 241-45). The vision of Jesus summons us, "to a ceaseless creativity that will produce in every age new blueprints for a society ever more consonant with Gospel vision of man. Lying on the horizons of human history and yet part of it, offered to us as a gift yet confronting us as a challenge, Jesus' vision of a new society stands before us as an unfinished task, summoning us to permanent revolution" (CWG 4, 244). Our task therefore, in India is to develop a theology of liberation "which will be concerned with both societal change and personal self-realization." (CWG 1, 56).

In our country, where millions of Indians are struggling to get their rights and longing for the fulfilment of the needs of their bodies and souls, the priests and religious have to follow the way of Jesus. Jesus' way of selfless love and service is the real, natural and easily accessible way to fulfilment. India is a '*kurukshetra*' rather the '*dharmakshetra*' where the forces of unfreedom, hatred and injustice are becoming more powerful. It is in such a situation the Liberative Pedagogy of Jesus will give us the direction to go the way of the Kingdom of God ruled by *Nishkama Karma* to establish Dharma characterized by freedom, fellowship and justice. Soares-Prabhu shows that such a response would usher in "a mighty

movement of personal and societal liberation which sweeps through human history. The movement brings *freedom* inasmuch it liberates each individual from the inadequacies and obsessions that shackle him. It fosters *fellowship*, because it empowers free individuals to exercise their concern for each other in genuine community. And it leads on to *justice*, because it impels every true community to adopt the just societal structures which alone make freedom and fellowship possible” (CWG 4,238-39). Such pedagogy would automatically demand our solidarity with the poor of God.

5.4. Be the Priests and Religious in Solidarity with the People of God

In his various writings, Soares-Prabhu points out to the westernized way of theologizing which does not emerge from grass root communities “but is the work of Western educated scholars, living in the seclusion of culturally isolated academic institutions, and theologizing in a foreign language” (CWG 4, 34). Drawing our attention especially to the seminary theology, he says that Christian theology in India is “an imitative and an imported theology, less concerned with local issues (poverty, religions, caste - which rarely figure in our theological treatises)” (CWG 4, 34).

It is because of this type of westernized theology with the “knife and fork culture”, “the sahib culture”, “colonial fortresses” (CWG 1,87-91). that we have become mediocre in mission, numb to injustice, insensitive to the cry of the poor and comfortable in our mansions. Soares-Prabhu asks therefore: “Where among us is the passion of Jesus? His sharp compassion? His blazing anger at injustice? His identification with the poor? Are we not too well-liked by the rich, too comfortably adjusted to an unjust society, too much at home with the powerful...? Has not our religious witness lost its bite? Are we not in danger of losing the sharp invigorating savour that the followers of Jesus are to communicate to the

world?” (CWG 3, 222).

His challenge to the Indian priests, religious and theologians is to play the role of a pilgrim who “must always go a little further” (CWG 1, 80), and produce the ‘Third World Theology’ by raising issues related to two massive closely interrelated realities, namely ‘overwhelming poverty’ and ‘multifaceted religiosity’ (CWG 1, 54). He is convinced that Christian spirituality cannot be authentic “without an active concern for the poor, who are experienced not merely as objects of charity but as brothers and sisters in need” (CWG 1, 192). The most significant traits of the spirituality of Jesus, namely “Freedom and love, leading to identification with the powerless and confrontation with those in power” should be the basis of the “spirituality suitable for those who are engaged in the struggle for the liberation of the poor and the oppressed” (CWG 3, 89). Because of Jesus’ self-defining option for the poor, “the life of Jesus is lived out in the twin dimensions of *solidarity and conflict*. These are the complementary expressions of his God-experience. The gospels show Jesus living a life of progressive identification with the poor and of growing conflict with those who oppress them” (CWG 4, 288).

In order to effectively carry out our Kingdom mission in India, Soares-Prabhu proposes that we need to approach our mission on three levels. 1) Institutional service to the needy through its health and education ministry; 2) Working not just for the poor but with the poor, in solidarity, mobilising them to confront “the principalities and powers” and 3) Involvement at ‘tree-tops’ to influence the policy makers and politicians in order to translate the values of the Kingdom into economic and political strategies (CWG 1, 154-55).

The inevitable outcome of this way of life is the Cross, which “exemplifies and vindicates with absolute assurance the spirituality and the praxis of Jesus, who in his freedom and his love chooses to identify with the weak and the foolish and oppose the wise and the

strong. It summons us as followers of Jesus to assume the same spirituality of solidarity and struggle” (CWG 3, 101). The Cross is the natural outcome of a life of solidarity with the poor and the outcasts but conflict with the rich and the powerful which leads “to the fatal confrontation which could only end with a foreseen and freely accepted death. And this death becomes the appropriate fulfilment of a life lived out with and for the poor and the outcasts. For on the cross Jesus is wholly poor and totally. Identification and confrontation have here reached their furthest possible limits. Jesus is one with the marginalized and all the martyred victims of the earth” (CWG 4, 290). It was a journey from the centre to the periphery. This was the journey of the Prophet. This too is the journey of myriads of prophets present today in India and is the way we are called to tread - to be the prophetic communities *of* and *for* the Kingdom of God.

5.5. *Be the Prophetic Communities of and for the Kingdom*

Soares-Prabhu calls upon the priests and religious to form prophetic communities *of* and *for* the Kingdom. As prophetic communities they become a symbol and sacrament of the Kingdom, thereby pointing to the reality they themselves are. Soares-Prabhu writes: “Religious life, then, is meant to be a visible communitarian sign. It “symbolizes on behalf of all Christians” and “testifies in an exemplary fashion” to the radical gospel values by which all Christians are invited to live. It does this by institutionalizing these values. ... *Religious then, live out institutionally, in a socially structured and therefore public and visible way, the radical*

demands of following Jesus” (CWG 3, 209-10). As religious we are followers of Jesus by profession. Religious life is “a living out publicly, professionally, institutionally (and therefore in community) of the “following of Christ as proposed by the gospel,” and so of the gospel values that are implicit in all Christian life. It is in this sense that religious life is a sign. It makes visible officially, institutionally, what is implicit in all true Christian existence” (CWG 3,210).

In the midst of our broken society scourged by consumerism on the one hand and destitution on the other, religious communities are called to take a stand on the side of the poor, lest we become godless. “For ultimately our greed is a sign of our godlessness; and the presence of the destitute in our midst is the mark of our infidelity to Jesus ... Our consumerism, then, is an option against God; our neglect of the poor is a neglect of Jesus” (CWG 2,267). In order that religious life becomes a symbol of the prophetic communities *of* and *for* the Kingdom, “religious communities must share with and so share in the lot of the poor; must reach out to the rejected and the outcast; and must show themselves wholly committed to the cause of the Kingdom. Sharing poverty, affirming love and committed obedience in community shape the prophetic ‘being’ of religious life” (CWG 3, 219).

In India, to be religious is to be a witness of Christ. That is the most effective way of professing our faith in Christ and proclaiming the message of the Kingdom. We as religious are called to be “*ex officio* ‘followers of Christ’” as “communities *of* and *for* the Kingdom” and that is how our



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life would be an authentic way of following Jesus (CWG 3,205-06). Light and salt are the two images proposed by Soares-Prabhu for the disciples of Christ - “as light which illumines the darkness, when it is not hidden under the bushel; or as salt which gives savour, as long as it has not lost its saltiness” (CWG 1, 42). This is why we are called to be salt and light, and because we are salt of the earth and the light of the world, we must let our light shine before others. We as salt and light in the Indian context of consumerism and destitution could become the messengers of Christ and the sacrament of God’s Kingdom. Salt and light are the two symbols that point to the religious communities as prophetic communities of and for the Kingdom of God that exercise their prophetic role through both their action and their being (CWG 3, 236). They become the sacrament of the Kingdom because as they show forth through “the quality of their lives (their ‘being’) the values of the Kingdom, they are equally communities for the Kingdom striving through their commitment to the total liberation of humankind to bring about the full realization of the Kingdom of God” (CWG 3, 236).

5.6. Be the Contrast Community living our Identity as the Little Flock

With our presence less than 2% of the entire population of India, we are an insignificant minority as far as the numbers are concerned. But we are the ‘Little Flock’, the image given to us by Jesus himself. As the little flock we are called to give up our possessions, and give alms, not to make purses for ourselves and to place our heart where our treasure is (Lk 12:32-34). Unfortunately, as Soares-Prabhu points out, “with the stifling ritualism of our worship and the unbridled legalism of our canon law, with all our ecclesiastical careerism, our petty tyrannies, our delight in tinsel titles, and our unceasing clamour for our ‘minority’ rights, with our large neglect of the poor, our shoddy compromises with the powerful, our connivance at injustice and our worship of

wealth, we are, surely, far indeed from the dream that Jesus dreamed” (CWG 3,133).

Here in this context, Soares-Prabhu summons us to be the ‘Contrast Communities’. That requires “a change of hearts and a change of structures.” The change should begin with us and with our structures, in order to become the contrast community projected by the Bible a reality. “For a change of structures without change of hearts will lead to new forms of oppression; while a change of hearts without change of structures will leave the present crushing form or oppression intact. Attitudinal and structural change are both necessary, because ultimately attitudes and structures are dialectically related” (CWG 4, 192-93).

The Church in India and the Religious communities in particular are to be ‘communities of being’ and ‘communities of action’. As communities of being religious communities are to be “contrast communities which show that it is possible to live fruitful and fulfilled lives based on values which are the opposite of those proposed by the power and possession hungry consumer society in which we live.... Religious communities are therefore communities of the Kingdom making visible in an anticipatory and provisional way the values of the end-time community (its freedom, its love, its justice) in the concrete historical circumstances of our time” (CWG 3, 211). This is a call given to God’s people whom God will fashion “into a community that will give concrete shape to his concern of the poor, and will function as a ‘contrast community’, a free, just, non-exploitative society that will provide an alternative societal model to the violent and oppressive city states” among whom are to live God’s people (CWG 4, 188).

What Soares-Prabhu says about the ‘contrast community’ is in fact happening in India, if we consider the contribution of myriads of Indian Christians who in their radical, public living out of the following of Jesus

“inevitably exercise the same prophetic impact on the Church as the Church in its faithfulness to the values of Jesus is expected to exercise towards the world” (*CWG* 3, 234). This necessarily entails the twin dimensions of the life of Jesus, namely solidarity and conflict. Do we have prophets today who live such a spirituality? Two examples can be showcased here as representatives of the Religious in India who pave the way for the Church in India to be a ‘contrast community’: Samuel Rayan and Stan Swamy. Speaking about Samuel Rayan, Soares-Prabhu writes:

In Rayan’s theology the academic resources of the West and the spiritual resources of the East come together to give something that is quite distinctively his own. His theology is unmistakably itself. It is marked by a steadfast commitment to the poor, a profound sensitivity to the religious traditions of India, and a rootedness in the Bible, read not as academic text but a religious book. It is expressed in a language that is lucid and moving, because it is the outflow of the intelligence and passion that informs his thinking. ... It succeeds admirably in bringing the prophetic, revolutionary message of Jesus to bear on the concrete situations that his readers live in (*CWG* 1,102-03).

A lot has been happening to Stan Swamy these days because of the stand he has taken for the Tribals. Stan Swamy (83) an Indian Jesuit, has been working for the integral development of the *Adivasis*, empowering them and helping them assert their dignity and rights and activate their agency, and stands with them as they oppose the ‘developmental’ processes that eventually would destroy their culture and life. Stan Swamy raises questions that make those who hold authority, power and wealth uncomfortable and annoys them. In order to suppress his prophetic voice, the Indian government goes all guns at him. That is why, falsely alleging Stan of the links with the Bhima- Koregaon incident and links with the Maoists aka Naxalites, the National

Investigation Agency (NIA) arrested him on 8th October 2020. Rejecting all the allegations, Stan stated clearly: “Over the last two decades, I have identified myself with the adivasi people and their struggle for a life of dignity and self-respect. As a writer, I have tried to analyze the different issues they face. In this process, I have clearly expressed my dissent over several policies and laws enacted by the government in the light of the Indian constitution. I have questioned the validity, legality and justness of several steps taken by the government and the ruling class” (Alla 2020).

Referring to the arrests of activists, intellectuals and student leaders all over the country and speaking about the broader process that is taking place all over the country, Stan says in a video message: “We are part of the process. In a way, I am happy, to be part of this process because I am not a silent spectator but a part of it, part of the game and ready to pay the price whatever it be” (Swamy 2020). Here is another example in Stan Swamy of the ‘contrast community’ that we are called to be and not to be a mere silent spectator. It is the Kairos moment of the Indian Church as Alla Stanislaus says: “Even though all Christians by vocation are called to be prophets, when they and especially clergy and religious, consciously ‘grow-up’ into prophets the Church can gladly recognize it as a Kairos moment” (Alla 2020).

Conclusion

Already in Vat II, more than 55 years ago, the Church had declared that the “joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well” (GS 1). Ever since, there have been many theologians all over the world, who are beaconing the Church to be in solidarity with the poor and afflicted. One striking example of such theologians in India is George M. Soares-Prabhu who gives the

clergy and religious in India the roadmap to be the prophetic communities *of* and *for* the Kingdom of God by being a 'contrast community' in order to live out our identity as the Church in solidarity with the poor and afflicted. The circumstances then and the circumstances now are similar, in fact, they are starker now.

Pope Francis invites us to show that solidarity with the poor and afflicted as he writes in his social encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* 33: "The pain, uncertainty and fear, and the realization of our own limitations, brought on by the pandemic have only made it all the more urgent that we rethink our styles of life, our relationships, the organization of our societies and, above all, the meaning of our existence." The mission of the Church becomes more urgent and challenging today, in the time of the pandemic but also because of the abject poverty, the fanatic religiosity and the corrupt political structures.

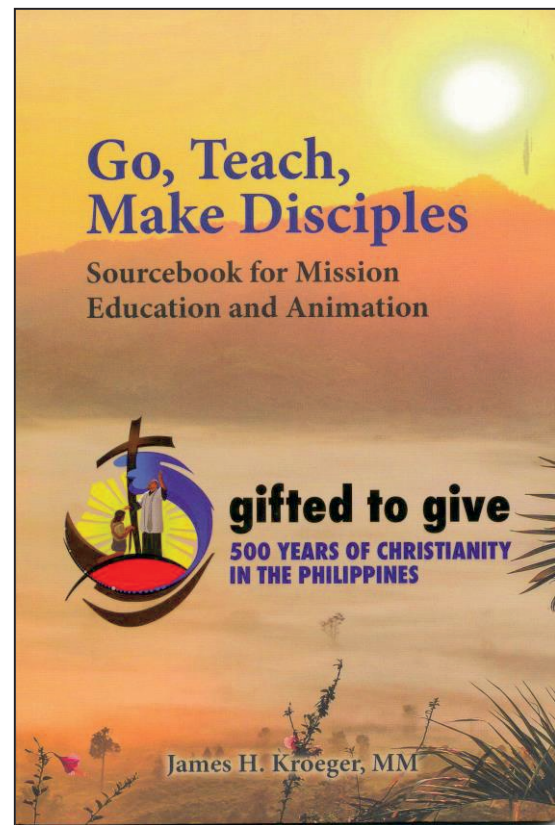
In order to live as the true followers of Christ in India, we need to personalize the vision of Jesus Christ. God is the Abba of all, loving us unconditionally, and hence we relate to the others as brothers and sisters on the Marga shown by Jesus, namely that of Agape - of loving concern. Many have lived the way of Jesus and many continue to live it in the present difficult times. The way is that of Agape, concern, praxis, as Soares-Prabhu asserts "the mystery of Jesus can be grasped only through praxis, because Jesus is essentially the way" (*CWG* 4, 291). Walking on the path of Jesus - the path of unconditional love, we could become the true witnesses of the Gospel of Christ. The Kingdom of God has been handed over to us as a gift, but it is not a finished product. It is also a task. It is already and not yet. The battle is on, the process continues, the call is to become part of the process.

The mission of Christ can be fulfilled if we become the Prophetic Communities *of* and *for* the Kingdom of God, that radiate the light of Christ to India to build a Nation based on Freedom, Fellowship, Justice. Imbibing His

Liberative Pedagogy, the mission of Christ can be carried out in the context of the divided nation by being the 'Contrast Community' and thereby bring about the Kingdom of God that Jesus envisaged. Let us take up our Cross and follow Him on His Agape Marga.

(Ref: *Jnanadeepa, Pune Journal of Religious Studies*, Volume 25/1-2, pp.106 - 132).

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