



India: The Catholic Church leads a Multi-Cultural Pluri-Religious Society in combatting the Covid-19 Pandemic

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“The poor give us much more than we give them. They're such strong people, living day to day with no food. And they never curse, never complain. We don't have to give them pity or sympathy. We have so much to learn from them”.

These words of St Mother Teresa of Calcutta, in a 1977 interview, come alive again today, as India - the heavily populated colossus from Asia - combats the Covid-19 Pandemic and the poorest of the poor turn out to be the ones to be struck the hardest. Panic, fear and the disastrous economic consequences of the Covid-19 Pandemic arrived rather late into the Indian sub-continent and what in January and February 2020 looked to us as a faraway happening in Europe only to be watched in television news and documentaries and to be read about in newspapers, had by the middle of March turned into a sword of Damocles hanging over the teeming millions, especially those living in crowded spaces. Jokes in the social media about the “Chinese virus” or “Corona beer” or “mask and masking” soon disappeared from circulation as the terror created by the reality nearer home superseded the fun-poking at a distant sufferer. One prominent national television channel finally said it loud: “We hate to break it to you, but these jokes are just not funny. Not anymore”. Experiences abound and heart-touching moments are many, but so too are the lessons of life learnt in human interaction during this unprecedented emergency.

A Pandemic that breached walls but also strengthened some barriers

Covid-19 swept the globe, breaking barriers and rupturing national boundaries, confines of cultural groups, and frontiers of religious identities. Once the virus spilled through the great wall of China, neither Netanyahu's wall along Israel's southern border, nor Trump's wall on the Mexican border

could stop its onward march. In India, the coronavirus struck across castes, religions, languages and regions showing little respect to the so-called upper castes or the privileged economic classes. Nor did it spare the poor and the marginalized. In the initial days, the poor of India called it “the virus of the rich and the privileged” because in their perception it was imported into India from foreign countries by those who had the money to fly. As panic and fear spread across the nation, it brought out the best and the worst in the human being, as happens in any tragedy.

Initially, right wing forces along with a powerful right wing leaning media spewed hate and venom against a particular minority community accusing it of being responsible for the spread of the disease across the country. This unfounded accusation now seems to be shifting into oblivion as the virus moves from city to city and state to state. The gap between the poor and the rich has just grown wider and become further conspicuous. A sudden unplanned national lockdown and some absurd rules curtailing transport and movement left millions of migrant workers stranded. According to official data, India has over 420 million people in the unorganized sector, including agricultural labourers, spread out across the length and breadth of the country. These invisible millions who eke out a precarious living working as construction workers, painters, food vendors and a host of other jobs suddenly found themselves jobless, homeless and without food as India was brought to a complete halt with a 60 day nationwide lockdown that may be extended further. These are people on the margins of society with no savings and therefore completely dependent on what they earn each day. In desperation many of these who are migrants from other states have hit the road on foot, trying to cover 1500 to 2000 km at times.

Meanwhile, leaders and bureaucrats in their drawing rooms draw up new rules to “keep the country safe” and impose social distancing on populations that rush towards food wherever it is distributed. The upper echelons of society are meanwhile organizing zoom conferences, webinars and social media often circulates news of the pastimes of the privileged, which include finding new cooking recipes each day, devising new quizzes or games to spend their time, finding old photos to share them with friends or watching the latest movies. Meanwhile, the poor are trudging along in the heat and the dust sorrowfully but determinedly to their homes which they had left behind to work in another state or region hoping that their children would have a better future. For them it is not about new recipes but whether they will find a morsel for themselves and their children. They cannot think of games and quizzes as their mind can only juggle the uncertainties of the future. There is no time for old photos or movies as they themselves are the actors of the movie of their precarious lives. Even as this piece is being written, news has just arrived that at least 16 migrant labourers were crushed to death early on 7th May by a goods train in Maharashtra after they fell asleep on the tracks. According to railway officials, the workers were walking towards their home state Madhya Pradesh after they lost their jobs due to the Covid-19 lockdown. Most public transportation has already been cancelled due to the lockdown. “We had walked a long distance and at around 5 am we stopped to drink water. But we were tired and fell asleep on and near the tracks where we were sitting. At that moment the train came and ran over us”, one of the survivors told a local news channel.

The Catholic Church: Solidarity Given, Solidarity Received

For the Catholic Church the Covid-19 crisis is a moment to adapt and to adjust, to find new means of practicing the faith, but above all it is an opportunity to be the bearer of mercy and compassion of Christ.

In a country, in which, attending religious services in a church, temple, mosque or gurudwara at least once a week if not more often is an integral and essential part of life, the lockdown on religious gatherings came as a cruel unexpected blow, particularly considering that the lockdown period included Ram Navami, the major festival of the Hindus, Ambedkar Jayanti celebrated by the Buddhists, Mahavir Jayanti of the Jains, Ramzan for the Muslims, Baisakhi for the Sikhs and Holy Week for the Christians. For the first time in living memory, all communities had to forego the public

celebration of their most important feasts. Churches went digital and the fine line between virtual worship and actual worship became blurred as many claimed that they had attended Mass on television but could not explain whether they had received Holy Communion. Requests for Confession over the phone to priests abounded but obviously could not be satisfied. Liturgists may have to work hard after the lockdown is lifted to explain and expound to simple common people why they should continue attending Mass in church and not “attend” it on television.

However, on the brighter side, the Catholic Church in India is doing what it knows to do best: comforting and assisting those in distress. Covid-19 with all its accompanying weapons of disease, panic and unpredictable and unplanned lockdowns have brought India to the verge of a humanitarian crisis. The Church was the first to offer its numerous hospitals and clinics for the use of the government in case of need in treating the sick, threw open its thousands of schools, colleges and other educational institutions to shelter migrants and homeless people in distress. Priests, nuns and lay volunteers have been fearlessly and courageously distributing food material or running community kitchens to feed thousands of poor and hungry people. The spiritual rewards and satisfaction are many often making our eyes well up with tears. A five month pregnant woman who along with her husband and two children aged three months and three years had walked over 60 km, for over thirty hours in an attempt to reach home in West Bengal, gratefully accepted the shelter of the Catholic Church on the border of the two states as Bengal would not accept them for the moment. Ten middle aged men walked for eight days trying to return home to their own state after they had not been able to find work for over 40 days and arrived shattered and weary to another of our shelters. Twelve young daily wage labourers bought new cycles using all the money they had to try and cycle home to Bihar over 600 km away, but were stopped by the police and placed in our shelter. Fifteen young workers from Orissa walked for four days to cross over and go to their native place in Jharkhand but were too tired to proceed and asked for shelter in one of our schools. Amazing is their resilience, tremendous their patience, immense their courage! Poverty has not taken off their dignity, need has not made them bitter, despair has not disheartened them. They complete the bureaucratic and medical formalities with serenity and nobility. These simple hardworking people possess a calmness and dignity of their own.

Very gratifying has been the solidarity of the people. Help comes in trickles and trifles very often from folks who do not have much but are ready to sacrifice for the other. During a distribution of food materials in a village, one poor widow with five children to feed was not able to get the food packet. It was heart rending to see how another poor woman opened her bag and shared the little we could give her. She told our volunteers: "It will not be possible for me to see my children eating while her children remain hungry".

Equally evident and palpable is the gratefulness of the heart. A lady with four children told another of our volunteers, "I did not know anything about

the Catholic Church before. But I will never forget what you have done for me and my children". And we in the Church know that what we are trying to do is only a drop in the immense ocean. But we look up towards heaven and can only hear the Lord exhort us, "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty'" (Luke 17:10).

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