

Letter of the Chairperson

Dalit Liberation Sunday 11th December 2011

Theme: Our God with Struggling People

Your Eminence/Grace/Excellency/Father/Sister/Brother in Christ,

Greetings of Peace and Joy to You!

Every year Dalit Liberation Sunday is an occasion for the entire Christian community to renew its commitment towards sisters and brothers of Dalit origin who suffer social economical and educational backwardness arising out of the traditional practice of untouchability.

Indian society is still under the grip of caste culture that perpetuates ethos, attitudes, structures of inequality and dehumanizing untouchable practices. Contrary to the Gospel vision of Christ 'caste mentality' prevails within Christian community. "It violates the God-given dignity and equality of human person. Human dignity and respect are due to human person and any denial of this is a sin against God and humans. (See Statement on Caste by Catholic Bishops Conference of India, Tiruchirappalli, January, 4-14, 1982).

The cries of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims for Scheduled Caste status are unheard, their non-violent, democratic representations and struggles are ignored by the Indian State and the mainstream media. The Union Government of India is yet to file a reply in the Supreme Court of India to the issues raised in the Writ Petitions filed from 2004 onwards, praying the deletion of paragraph 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order 1950.

The Christian community as a whole needs to identify helpless groans and assertive struggles of Dalits as a privileged locus of divine revelation. The Spirit of Life with its salvific intervention is actively present in the battered bodies, wounded psyche, dynamic restlessness, unrelenting articulation, creative imagination and aesthetic expressions of the Dalits. (See The Statement of the Indian Theological Association- 28th Annual Meeting, (Bangalore (April 24-28, 2005).

Jesus of Nazareth who shares the Dalit origin, anointed by the Spirit of God, announces the Good news to the afflicted and to soothe the broken-hearted Dalits. God of compassion clothes Dalits in garments of salvation and wraps them in a cloak of saving justice. Vested interests may deceive Dalits and the Union Government may delay justice to the Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims. But God of justice is wrestling on behalf of them and as the earth sends up its shoots and a garden makes seeds sprout, so God of Life makes saving justice and praise spring up in the sight of all nations. (Isaiah 61: 1-2, 10-11).

Let this Dalit Liberation Sunday instill in us the hope that God leads our struggle to demand equal rights for Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims and our efforts to build inclusive communities of justice, peace and joy.

Suggested Action Plan:

- Kindly preach about the struggles of Dalits in general and Dalit Christians in particular and the need for the entire Christian community to involve in the struggle.
- Please organize processions, rallies, meetings, seminars to conscientize the parish communities and the public about the Dalit and Dalit Christian, Dalit Muslim issue.
- Kindly send a memorandum signed by all the members of Christian community to the Prime Minister and copies to the UPA Chairperson, the Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment, the Minister for Minority Affairs and Minister for Law and Justice.
- Since we need to intensify our lobbying and to strengthen the Supreme Court Case, you are invited to send your contribution in favour of “CBCI Office for SC/BC.” Even a small contribution will be very helpful.

Thanking you for all your prayerful support and collaboration

Yours Sincerely in Christ Jesus,

(Most Rev. A. Neethinathan)
Chairperson
CBCI Office for SC/BC

Reflection on the Theme

(The following reflections are provided by the CBCI Office for SC/BC to assist you in animating the Faithful and creating awareness among them on the importance of the Dalit Liberation Sunday. They may be used as a resource in preaching, talks and other means of animation. Ed.)

- During the season of Advent we meditate on God’s intervention in history and immersion into humanity by becoming a human person. God who has been with his people continues to be with them in joys, sorrows, anxieties, anguish, hopes and efforts to realize fullness of life.
- God’s special care for the vulnerable people is expressed clearly in the first reading of today: “He has sent me to bring the news to the afflicted, to soothe the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, release those in prison,…” (Is 61: 1-2)
- The Nazareth Manifesto of Jesus (Lk 4: 16-19) emphatically defines his mission and his disciples. The community of the disciples is called to continue the mission of Christ by exercising “the gift of prophesy” not stifling the Spirit of God who dwells in us and in the Church to inspire us to “hold on to what is good and shun every form of evil.” (1 Thes 5: 16-17). Hence the Christian community as a whole is called to continue the struggle for justice for Dalits professing Christian Faith with hope amidst the delay and denial of justice by the Union Governments of India.
- Dalits professing Christian Faith are denied benefits of affirmative action such as political representation from panchayat level to Parliament, special legal protection, employment, scholarships,

loans, access to funds allotted under Scheduled Caste Sub Plan (SCSP) since they profess a religion of their own choice. This is blatant violation against the freedom of religion enshrined in the Constitution of India. It is gross violation of fundamental human rights. In short, they are second class citizens of this country. The root cause is paragraph 3 of the Constitution Scheduled Castes Order 1950 which confines the benefits of Scheduled Caste status to Dalits of Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist origin. We are called to oppose this communal paragraph and seek justice through legal remedy and executive action through our collective efforts.

- The season of Advent is a time to overcome darkness by bearing witness to the light. John the Baptist bore witness to Christ the Light of the World. As witnesses to Christ, we need to overcome darkness of casteism within the Christian community and crooked caste attitudes and structures operating in the society. Let us recall the message of Blessed Pope John Paul II, addressed to a group of Bishops from India on 17 November, 2003, “They (Christians of SC origin) should never be segregated from other members of society. Any semblance of a caste-based prejudice in relations between Christians is a countersign to authentic human solidarity, a threat to genuine spirituality and a serious hindrance to the Church’s mission of evangelization. Therefore, customs or traditions that perpetuate or reinforce caste division should be sensitively reformed so that they may become an expression of solidarity of the whole Christian community.” We need to supplant structures of caste-arrogance with values of humble service to the sisters and brothers of Dalit community. The Spirit of Jesus urges every Christian to relate to the weak, particularly to Dalits in our society with humility and love them as human persons.
- Mr. Velankanni, brother of a priest hailing from Dalit Christian community was buried at the parish cemetery on 22nd January 2011 at Thatchoor, Kancheepuram District, Tamilnadu. It was possible due to the efforts of the diocesan administration supported by the Untouchability Eradication Front and other human rights movements. Thatchoor parish was closed for more than ten years because of the struggle for equality by Dalit Christians and the opposition from non-Dalit Christians. After the burial, the local MLA and the members of the Untouchability Eradication Front asked the local Sub Inspector of Police to give protection to the parish priest of Thatchoor, the family of deceased person and Dalit families.
- It is a call for the entire Christian community to take note of all forms of discrimination and take positive steps to eradicate untouchability within the community. It is a call to follow the footsteps of our Lord Jesus who came to restore human dignity and God’s reign of equality and fellowship.
- Let us introspect ourselves: Are we able to overcome darkness of casteism and change our crooked caste attitudes and untouchable practices? Are we humble enough to accept the leadership from Dalit community? Are we ready to include sisters and brothers of Dalit community in decision-making process and accept their skills, talents and wisdom for the growth of the Christian community and development of society? Do we promote inter-ritual and inter-caste marriages and inter-dining? Are we bold enough to take steps to eradicate visible forms of discrimination in the diocese such as separate cemetery, two places in the same worshiping place and so on?
- Let us be like John the Baptist in bearing witness to Christ the Light by overcoming darkness of casteism and untouchability. As children of light let us make straight the way of the Lord practicing values of equality, solidarity and fellowship.