

# **Policy of Dalit Empowerment**

## **in the Catholic Church in India**

### **An Ethical Imperative to Build Inclusive Communities**

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## **FOREWORD**

India is a cradle of many civilizations and religions. Great sages envisaged a common human family and recognized the ray of the Divine in all human beings. Unfortunately, there are also blots in the Indian society such as casteism and untouchability. Many social reformers tried to transform the situation but could not succeed much. The constitution of India clearly spells that “untouchability” is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of ‘Untouchability’ shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law.” (Article 17). Efforts are continuing to eradicate untouchability.

The Church has been playing an important role in empowering Dalits. Individually and organizationally endeavors have been made to educate and to employ them. Dalits professing Christian Faith are still denied by the Government of India the benefits of the reservation policy given to other Dalits professing Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist Faiths.

During the seminars about Dalit empowerment, meetings with the Dalit leaders, strong suggestions had emerged for a clear policy from the Church on Dalit empowerment. The 125<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, an unique leader who spearheaded the struggles of the marginalized communities particularly the Dalits, was another occasion for deep reflection on the Dalits issue.

Considering the present scenario and keeping in mind the need to awaken the Dalit communities, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) is making this landmark decision of issuing its Dalit policy. It is the fruit of various deliberations held by leaders who are interested in the cause of Dalits discussed and approved by the Catholic Bishops of India. This Policy gives clear directions for the Church to further empower Dalits who are in need of special attention and care.

It is the call of the Church along with the Magnificat of Mother Mary to create an equitable Church and society proclaiming "*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty*".(Lk 1: 52-53)

As the president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, I whole heartedly urge the Bishops, priests, religious and lay leaders to internalize and to implement the policy in all levels. We should consider it as our obligation based on Christian Faith to empower our children, sisters and brothers of Dalit origin and other marginalized people. May our Lady Mother of the poor and the marginalized intercede for us in our efforts to strengthen the weak and marginalized.

+ Baselios Cardinal Cleemis  
Major Archbishop-Catholics &  
President, Catholic Bishops' Conference of India.

## Acknowledgement

All human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. Hence everyone is precious in the eyes of God and fellow human beings. The central truth of the Christian faith is the Incarnation. Jesus our Savior became a human person to affirm human dignity. The life and mission of Jesus is to preach the love of God and love of neighbor. The preferential love for the neglected and the despised is

the characteristic mark of the ministry of Jesus. The Nazareth Manifesto (Luke 4:16-18), his special love towards the outcastes, the lepers, the despised and the women are unique aspects of the ministry of Jesus.

Anything that goes against human worth is against the plan of God. Caste discrimination and untouchability are against the fundamental tenets of Christian Faith. Hence, in the liturgy of Baptism there is a call to renounce casteism. However, practices of untouchability do exist in the Church. The CBCI statements painfully observe these facts and exhort the Christian community to eradicate these abominable practices. The Catholic Bishops of India have committed themselves to empower Dalits and other marginalized groups in the church and in the society.

The Indian state discriminates against Dalits professing Christian Faith by denying the benefits of the Reservation Policy. It means depriving Dalit Christians their means to livelihood such as economic benefits, job opportunities, denying political representation and legal protection given under SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act (1989). Various regional and national commissions, including the Mandal Commission and recent Ranganath Misra Commission have recommended that the benefits of the reservation policy must be extended to all Dalits. Many years of democratic and peaceful struggle to obtain equal rights for Dalit Christians has not produced the desired results.

We are celebrating the birth anniversary of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the undisputed leader of Dalits who was the brain behind the Reservation policy which is an expression of social justice. There is no doubt that the Church has played an important role in educating the Dalits, Adivasis and other marginalized groups. However, it is the need of the hour to spell out clearly the policy of the Church in empowering the Dalits. Collective and united actions are needed for the human flourishing of children, sisters and brothers of Dalit origin.

In response to this need the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India has prepared a policy for Dalit empowerment. It is the fruit of various deliberations held at the regional and national levels. Let me acknowledge here the commitment and the hard work done by bishops, priests, religious, activists, theologians, biblical scholars, sociologists, regional and diocesan secretaries and particularly the

CBCI Office for SC/BC. I would like to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to each and every one of them. My heartfelt gratitude to the CBCI Office- bearers, the members of the Standing Committee of CBCI and the special drafting committee to study the policy.

Our credible and meaningful presence in the nation is possible only when we share the pain and agony of our children, sisters and brothers of Dalit origin. Let us strive our level best to accompany them through our collective efforts to realize the dream of Jesus, a new social order where love, peace, equality and justice reign supreme.

### **Most Rev. A. Neethinathan**

Chairperson, CBCI Office for SC/BC

Bishop of Chingleput

#### **List of Abbreviations**

AIACHE	-	All India Association for Christian Higher Education
AICU	-	All India Catholic Union
AIIMS	-	All India Institute of Medical Sciences
AL	-	Amoris Laetitia
BC	-	Backward Class
CBCI	-	Catholic Bishops' Conference of India
CBO	-	Community Based Organisation
CBSE	-	Central Board of Secondary Education
CDLM	-	Christian Dalit Liberation Movement
CRI	-	Conference of Religious India
CSCO	-	Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin
CSO	-	Civil Society Organization
CST	-	Catholic Social Teaching
CTA	-	Committee for Tribal Affairs
DCLM	-	Dalit Christian Liberation Movement
DSSS	-	Diocesan Social Service Society
EFI	-	Evangelical Fellowship of India
GS	-	Gaudium et Spes
IAS	-	Indian Administrative Service
IFS	-	Indian Foreign Service

IIM	-	Indian Institute of Management
IIT	-	Indian Institute of Technology
IPS	-	Indian Police Service
LI	-	Laudato Si
MIDS	-	Madras Institute of Development Studies
MPCE	-	Monthly Per capita Consumption Expenditure
NBCLC	-	National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre
NCCI	-	National Council of Churches in India
NCDC	-	National Council of Dalit Christians
NCSC	-	National Commission for Scheduled Castes
NCST	-	National Commission for Scheduled Tribes
NGO	-	Non-Governmental Organization
NHRC	-	National Human Rights Commission
SC	-	Scheduled Caste (Dalits)
SCSP	-	Scheduled Caste Sub Plan (Special Component Plan)
SRS	-	Sollicitudo Rei Socialis
ST	-	Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis / Indigenous Peoples)
TNBC	-	Tamil Nadu Bishops' Council
TSP	-	Tribal Sub Plan

## I. Introduction

1. In the beginning God created human beings in ‘His own image and likeness’ (Gen 1:26). But when they alienated themselves from Him, evil entered the world and destroyed the beauty of the universe. To re-create and restore His image, God sent His only Son (Jn 3:16) to proffer salvation and the possession of total well-being, enabling all human beings to experience their fulfilment, where all would live in total equality, fellowship and communion. A sustained movement to strive for the well-being of all and in particular the Dalits is an urgent need for the biblical vision to become a reality in India. This policy aims at rooting out all discriminative caste consciousness and similar divisive prejudices and iniquitous practices.
2. Dalits, though historically the daughters and sons of the soil, are today alienated from it and they are silenced and robbed of dignity,<sup>1</sup> largely deprived of the basic necessities of life. They are seen and treated as children of a lesser God. However, there is a growing consciousness in the Church to restore dignity of all and justice to the last and the least.
3. Pope John Paul II has categorically stated:

“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 and 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.”<sup>2</sup>

4. In the “Face of Mercy”, Pope Francis indicates that justice and mercy are the two sides of God’s love. Justice is to be imparted with regard to the human dignity of Dalits so that the entire humankind enjoys the mercy and love of God, our common Father.
5. As the Church celebrates the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Dignitatis Humanae* (Human Dignity) and the 125<sup>th</sup> year of Catholic Social Teaching, and as India commemorates the 125<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the Holy Year of Mercy is a *Kairos* moment (the privileged moment of Divine Grace) for the Indian Church.
6. Deeply aware of the challenges ahead of us in living and experiencing God’s love, the CBCI adopts and promulgates the **“Policy of Dalit Empowerment in the Catholic Church in India”**, inviting everyone to go through a process of *metanoia* (repentance) and experience the Easter joy, radically transforming our minds and hearts individually, collectively and structurally. Duly acknowledging various efforts taken by the Church in recent decades, this policy is a step forward, to root out practices of untouchability and caste discrimination at all levels and empowerment of Dalits and Dalit Christians demanding constitutional protection and justice from the state as citizens.
7. This policy should not be misconstrued as an effort to divide the Church along caste lines but as an effort to help the deprived within the Church and an invitation to live our faith

more meaningfully and radically, ushering in the era of a New Heaven and a New Earth, following the footsteps of the Risen Lord.

8. Highlighting various efforts taken by the Catholic Church in the last four decades, this document invites us to build God's kingdom here on earth, especially in the Indian context. It also gives a clarion call to the faithful to join hands with all people of goodwill in this new journey filled with mercy, solidarity and justice.

## **II. Dalit Realities and the Status of Dalit Christians**

9. The painful realities of Dalit Christians are organically linked to the realities of Dalits, *adivasis*, minorities, women, children, and other marginalized and excluded communities. However, the experience of untouchability is unique to Dalits, resulting in deprivation, discrimination and exclusion at all levels, from womb to tomb.
10. Every 18 minutes a crime is committed against a Dalit. Every day, 3 Dalit women are raped, 2 Dalits are murdered, 11 are beaten, and 2 Dalit houses are burnt. Official police statistics in 2012 observes that in the previous five years, every week 13 Dalits are murdered, 6 are kidnapped or abducted, and 5 Dalit houses or possessions are burnt.<sup>3</sup>
11. 37 per cent of Dalits live below the poverty line. 54 per cent of their children are malnourished, 21 per cent are undernourished, and 21 per cent are severely underweight. 83 per 1000 children born in Dalit community die before the first birthday; 12 per cent die before their fifth birthday. 45 per cent of Dalits are illiterate; literacy rates for Dalit women are as low as 37.8 per cent in rural India. Dalit women are burdened with double discrimination (gender and caste). Only 27 per cent of Dalit women give institutional deliveries.
12. About one-third of Dalit households lack basic facilities. Public health workers refuse to visit Dalit homes in 33 per cent of villages. Dalits are prevented from entering the police station in 27.6 per cent of villages. Dalit children have to sit separately while eating in 37.8 per cent of government schools. Dalits do not get mail delivered to their homes in 23.5 per cent of villages. Dalits are denied access to water sources in 48.4 per cent of villages.
13. The conviction rate under the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act is 15.71 per cent and pendency is as high as 85.37 per cent.

*"A large number of cases which deserve to be registered under the Protection of Civil Rights Act or the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act are not actually registered under these Acts, either due to ignorance of law or under pressure from the interested parties. Investigation in even those limited number of cases is often carried out in a slipshod manner and with considerable delay."*<sup>4</sup>

14. Dalit and tribal students in higher educational institutions of repute, such as the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi (AIIMS), Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), medical as well as engineering colleges, besides universities, government and private, have committed suicide in the face of monstrous caste-based discrimination from the upper-caste faculty and fellow students. Inquiry commissions, headed by upper-caste judges, have in most cases found no merit in the complaints of Dalit students. The National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC) and the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST), which are supposed to function as watchdogs, prefer to keep silence for fear of losing their sinecures.
15. The State envisioned that the three-pronged approach and strategy adopted in the Constitution<sup>5</sup> would gradually help to eliminate conditions which lead to this violence and over a period of time would promote equality in society.<sup>6</sup>
16. But the evidence shows that the State has failed in building India as a social democracy. Due to lack of political will, there has not been an earnest and sustained implementation of policies and programmes at all levels. Neo-liberalism, the new economic ideology of the State, has further impoverished Dalits. Communal forces have *greatly* polarized Dalits on the basis of sub-castes and religions. As a result, Dalit organizations, civil society organizations (CSOs) and people's movements are in perpetual conflict with the State.

### **Status of Dalit Christians**

17. Dalit Christians experience the same measure of discrimination, violence and exclusion as other Dalits.<sup>7</sup> But they cannot avail the protection of The Prevention of Atrocities Act, since under the law they are not deemed to be Dalits.
18. Moreover, Dalit Christians are sandwiched between the State and the Church. Presidential Order, 1950, in para 3 stipulates that "no person who professes a religion different from Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism shall be deemed to be a member of Scheduled Caste". In *Soosai v. Union of India*, in 1985, the Supreme Court accepted that caste continues even after conversion, but said that there was not enough evidence that Dalit Christians after conversion are socially and economically as backward as Dalit Hindus. The *Soosai* judgment goes against Article 15(1) of the Constitution, which prohibits discrimination based on religion.
19. The Church, by any measure, cannot fully provide compensatory justice to Dalit Christians who have been forced to live as outcastes for thousands of years; but it has the capacity to negotiate and prevail over the political leadership using all the resources within its reach. The Catholic Church is committed to intensify its efforts in support of the Dalit Christians' struggle for justice, equality and empowerment.
20. As indicated by various studies the common forms of untouchability faced by Scheduled Caste converts include discrimination suffered at common water sources (22 per cent), at

school (12 per cent), in intermarrying with Dalit converts, etc. A large majority of Dalit Christians were of the view that there was no significant difference in the attitude of the Hindus towards Dalits in general or towards Dalit converts. Unfortunately, caste mentality has persisted even among some of the Christians<sup>8</sup>.

21. Antony Raj in *Discrimination against Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu* (IDEAS, Madurai, 1992) identified a number of discriminatory practices in the Church. According to the survey conducted by AIACHE in 2001, the number of Scheduled Caste students in Church-run colleges was not at a desirable level<sup>9</sup>. Given the importance of education and professional skills, all-out efforts must be made to create conditions enabling Dalit students to enter our educational institutions.

22. Prof. Satish Deshpande observes:

*“There can be no doubt whatsoever that Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians are socially known and treated as distinct groups within their own religious communities. Nor is there any room for disputing the fact that they are invariably regarded as ‘socially inferior’ communities by their coreligionists.”<sup>10</sup>*

*“Dalit Christians in urban India are even worse off relative to other Christians than their rural counterparts. Rural Dalit Christians have a much higher illiteracy rate, and much smaller proportion of graduates. Urban Dalit Christians are also in much the same situation. In Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditure (MPCE) Dalit Christians are considerably worse off than their non-Dalit co-religionists. Indeed, the differences are so great that Dalit Christians may almost be living in a different world from other Christians.”<sup>11</sup>*

“Universally practiced forms of discrimination and exclusion include social and cultural segregation, expressed in various forms of refusal to have any social interaction; endogamy, expressed through the universal prohibitions on Dalit-non-Dalit marriages and through severe social sanctions on both Dalits and non-Dalits who break this taboo. Social segregation extends to the sphere of worship and religious rituals, with separate churches and priests being almost the norm among Dalit Christians. Subordination in churches as well as insistence on separate burial grounds is not uncommon. Occupational segregation and economic exploitation are also very common and usually related practices, though somewhat less widespread than segregation or marriage bans.<sup>12</sup>

23. Dalit Christians are the majority in the Catholic Church.<sup>13</sup> But their participation in the level of leadership in the diocesan administration as well as in religious orders is minimum and at the higher levels it is almost nil”.
24. Dalits are about 12 million out of 19 million members of the Catholic Church. However, among the Major Superiors, priests and religious they are not proportionately represented. It is pertinent to note that the first bishop from Dalit community was appointed in 1977. At present, there are 12 bishops from Dalit community.<sup>14</sup> In recent years, there is an increase in vocations from Dalit communities.

25. Various efforts made by the Church and Dalit organisations, in particular Dalit Christian organizations have facilitated the articulation of the plight of Dalit Christians within the Church and in relation to the State. There is wider acceptance that the practice of untouchability and discrimination against Dalits exist in the Church and there is need to address these issues urgently. There is also now more acceptance of the rights and dignity of Dalits at least at the ideological and theoretical level.
26. Overt forms of practices of untouchability and discrimination have considerably reduced. There is greater awareness of self-dignity, access to public space and demand for equal participation and share in resources. In a sense, the Church structures have been sensitized and the younger generation is growing with a much higher sense of dignity and self-worth.
27. Changes made in the policy of education, especially in admission and appointment, have given new opportunities for Dalit Christians and many, for the first time, have been able to enter the portals of Catholic educational institutions. The new generation is looking for opportunities to develop its skills and is ready to take risks to fulfil its basic needs.
28. The vocations to priesthood, brotherhood and women religious are increasing. It needs to be appreciated that there is an increasing awareness to promote vocations among Dalit Christians and a number of congregations take up a special vocation promotion drive in areas where predominantly Dalit Christians live which needs to be appreciated.
29. Changes introduced in the liturgy, as a result of growing new theological understanding, have contributed greatly in the faith formation of the Christians. Serious and conscious efforts were made by the Catholic Church to look into the Catholic faith from Dalit point of view and how God intervenes in history, in and through the suffering and cry of the poor and the marginalized. This has given birth to courses on Dalit philosophy and Dalit theology in seminaries and formation houses.
30. It is nevertheless a reality that newer forms of discrimination have come into being. Since there is inadequate representation in seminaries in appointments to key positions and in sharing of common resources in the religious orders and in the Church in general, efforts need to be made to remedy the situation given the importance of good priests and religious for the mission of the Church.
31. Dalits are also deprived access to social, economic and educational benefits, especially in courses which are job-oriented or in demand. There is little opportunity for students of the first generation. Instead of supporting and accompanying, especially in courses which are in demand, sometimes there is outright denial of admission alleging incapacity and unsuitability.
32. Despite possessing commendable credentials, the fact of being a Dalit – *Dalitness* – is considered as inferior. This mindset is against the core belief of Christianity, that every

human person is created in the image of God. While the term caste Hindu may be justified, caste Christian is simply self-contradictory, to say the least.

33. Sometimes there is failure in redressing genuine concerns and grievances of Dalits that are brought to the fore and limitations in addressing them in a spirit of fraternal dialogue. It is deplorable that instead recourse is taken to police and legal action.
34. Dalit leadership is not sufficiently recognised and promoted. Instead of nurturing and cherishing leadership from below, in some instances, the traditional casteist approach is adopted to divide the faithful by some vested interest groups.
35. Economic empowerment is the need of the hour. The Church through its social work wings such as Caritas India and Diocesan Multi-Purpose Social Service Societies does much for the Dalits. However much could have been done to promote Dalit entrepreneurship.
36. The Church has moved on from being content with doling out some schemes and programmes to developing a deeper understanding of the causes and manifestations of deprivation, discrimination and exclusion of Dalit Christians within the Church, by the larger society and by the State. The emergence of Dalit movements and Dalit Christian movements and assertion of Dalit rights from the human rights perspective have contributed enormously in this journey. It is high time that every Christian goes through a process of *metanoia* (repentance), imbibing the mind and heart of Jesus (cf. Phil 2:5) in building God's kingdom here on earth where all of us can, in one voice, call God our Mother and Father.

### **Growing Dalit Consciousness**

37. Atrocities and violence have not deterred the emerging Dalit consciousness. The birth centenary of Dr Ambedkar in 1991 and a decade later in 2001 the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held at Durban, were watershed moments in Dalit assertion. These two events provided the necessary impetus for various Dalit and human rights organizations to bring to global consciousness the appalling status of Dalits in India.
38. The Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu noted at the conference:

*"India was at the forefront of the struggle against apartheid and expressed the belief that the Indian people would want to end the scourge of caste discrimination. I still hope that this is so, and I strongly urge the Indian Government and my own government to endorse international efforts to end the practice of 'untouchability', which is a blot on humanity. Such support would be a boost to the struggle for Dalit rights, not only in India, but all over the world."*<sup>15</sup>

39. The Indian political class engages in aggressive economic reforms, blissfully oblivious of social stigmatization and spreads a false paradigm of development that growth in gross domestic product will set right social relationships. Evidence shows that the casteist mindset continues to derail the constitutional liberating vision of India built on justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity.<sup>16</sup>
40. Despite the casteist, arrogant mindset of the State, individuals, activists, academicians, human rights defenders, Dalit organizations and people's movements continue to highlight the hidden realities of Dalits by educating, agitating and organizing Dalit *bahujan* (oppressed communities).

### **III. Journey of the Catholic Church in Empowering Dalit Christians**

41. The Roman Catholic Diocese of Goa was established in 1533. The Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier arrived in Goa in 1542 and preached along the coastal areas. Dalits, who were experiencing the iron grip of the caste system and were being treated worse than animals by the casteist society which followed Manu Shastra which legitimized the iniquitous caste system on the basis of Hindu Scriptures, embraced Christianity as an act of social protest and religious prophetic action as they envisioned a new dignified life in following Jesus, the Saviour of all, imparting the fullness of life. This paved the way for Dalit conversions.
42. The Jesuit missionary Robert De Nobili came to India in 1605 and established the Roman Catholic Madurai Mission. He was followed by missionaries like John de Britto and Joseph Constantine Beschi, who contributed a lot for the growth of the Church in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in India. They, and many other missionaries and eventually the local clergy, barring a few,<sup>17</sup> followed the policy of accommodation<sup>18</sup> of the caste system in Christianity. Caste was considered to be a social factor to be tolerated in the effort for evangelization. However, within both the Catholic and Protestant Churches there were several individuals who took a strong stand against caste discrimination, condemning caste as a cancerous and monstrous evil.
43. When the toleration of caste discrimination became widespread, the oppressed people demanded equality in the Church. The Synod of Pondicherry was organized in 1844 to foster harmony between Dalit Christians and caste Christians. Later, on 15 January 1925, the Scheduled Caste (Dalit) Christian Welfare Association sent a memorandum to the Vicar Apostolic to India, Bishop Alexius Maria Henry Lapier, to look into the discriminatory practices adopted by the "dominant castes" in the Church.
44. To understand and address the plight of Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin (CSCO), who suffered from double discrimination (on account of religion and caste), the First

National Convention, inviting members and leaders from all the Churches was organized by the National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre (NBCLC) in June 1978, under the joint auspices of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) and the All India Catholic Union (AICU).

45. Acknowledging that Dalits are victims of double injustice, the convention called upon the Churches in India to address this question with a renewed commitment to ensure that the resources of the Churches, such as schools, colleges, technical institutes, hospitals and dispensaries, etc. would be used on a priority basis for the integral development of Christians of Scheduled Caste origin. The convention also emphatically urged the leaders to ensure adequate representation for Dalits in Church-run institutions in admission and appointments, allocation of Church resources, motivating and encouraging the young to join seminaries and convents and protesting against the denial of equal rights and benefits by the State. It gave a clarion call to the entire Christian community to rally around these concerns and launch united action to address them.
46. To initiate a structured and systematic response, the General Body Meeting of the CBCI, held at Ranchi in 1979, decided to set up a Special Desk to study the problems of the Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin and Tribes which was accordingly established at the CBCI Centre, New Delhi.
47. The CBCI General Body, which met at Tiruchirapalli in 1982, unequivocally condemned the sinful caste system.

*"Caste with its consequent effects of discrimination and 'caste mentality' has no place in Christianity. It is, in fact, a denial of Christianity because it is inhuman. It violates the God-given dignity and equality of the human person. Human dignity and respect are due to every person and denial of this is a sin against God and man. It is an outright denial of the fatherhood of God."*

48. In 1986, the CBCI General Body Meeting, held in Goa, raised the Special Desk to the status of a Commission for SC/ST/BC<sup>19</sup>, and invited all dioceses to create commissions for SC/ST/BC, to be animated and coordinated by the CBCI Commission
49. At its plenary assembly in Shillong in 1989, the CBCI strongly opposed the denial of rights and benefits to the Christian Dalits granted to other Dalits.

*"The Christians of Scheduled Caste origin have a double discrimination, as due to the Presidential Order of 1950, they are excluded from the benefits which the Constitution of India guarantees to their counterparts in the Hindu and Sikh religion,<sup>20</sup> while like their Hindu brothers and sisters they suffer the brunt of caste discrimination. Converts to Catholicism from among them had hoped for a status of equality, but the structured inequalities practised in Hinduism continue to be reflected and imposed in the new faith."*

50. A decade later, in 1998, the CBCI at its General Body Meeting held at Varanasi, reiterated that discrimination on the basis of Caste is a sin and made a fervent appeal that

the Church take concrete steps to end this evil through education and enlightenment of its members.

*“This must be taught in catechism and homilies and any form of discrimination must be completely stopped, wherever it exists, be it among the priests, in religious communities, in practices of selection of candidates for priesthood and religious life and in the sphere of administration.”*

51. In 2000, the Conference of Religious of India, meeting in Chennai, committed itself to work for the development of Dalit Christians by opening up the infrastructural facilities run by its members. Subsequently a few religious orders initiated policies, systems and mechanisms for the empowerment of Dalit Christians in their institutions.
52. In 2002, the CBCI General Body, meeting at Jalandhar, in solidarity with the Dalits committed to give them a share in the resources of the Church

*“Dalits and tribals are politically exploited, educationally most backward and are socially discriminated against. In this situation of appalling poverty of the vast majority of the people in India, the Church has to become not just a Church for the poor but the Church of the poor.”*

The meeting also declared that “the resources of the Church would be made available for the educational empowerment of Dalits, the tribals and the women. Training and educational opportunities both for jobs and appropriate leadership roles will be offered to the Dalits and Tribals”

53. Over the last few decades, the Church leaders in collaboration with other Christian communities and people of goodwill have been organizing demonstrations, protests, rallies and campaigns in the national capital and in various state capitals, cities and villages to conscientize the nation on Dalit issues. Ecumenical delegations met various political party leaders to gather support. Signature campaigns were initiated to press for their demands with decision-makers. Since 2010 Black Day has been observed on 10 August every year to express discontent about the status of Dalits in the nation. Since 1992 Justice Sunday was observed as Dalit Liberation Sunday. Later from 2000 it has been observed annually on a Sunday close to the International Human Rights Day on 10 December. Celebrated jointly by the CBCI and NCCI it intends to raise awareness in the Christian community about the dignity, the rights and the culture of the Dalit and Dalit Christians.
54. In 2004 the CBCI filed a Writ Petition in the Supreme Court (180 / 2004) to demand justice for Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims. The Justice Ranganath Misra Commission in its report, submitted to the central government in 2007, emphatically recommended that Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims must be granted equal rights with other Dalits and Government must repeal the Presidential Order of 1950 paragraph 3.

55. The CBCI also made a definitive commitment for the educational uplift of Dalits, clearly articulating its position while promulgating the All India Catholic Education Policy, 2007. It stated:

*“No Catholic child, Dalit/tribal or otherwise, should be deprived of quality education because of a lack of means”. (CBCI 2006, 8.1)*

*“Those disadvantaged, socially, physically or intellectually, will be specially assisted so that they can be integrated into the educational system. We make this preferential option, even if in this process academic results suffer. All Catholic schools, whether run by dioceses, the religious, corporate bodies or individuals, are expected to participate in this project.” (CBCI 2006, 8.3)*

56. At the regional level, the Tamil Nadu Bishops' Council (TNBC) began affirmative action by declaring the Dalit Decade in 1990 in the Catholic Church in Tamil Nadu. TNBC launched a ten-point programme, a sort of *Magna Carta*, for the empowerment of Dalit Catholics in a phased manner. The programme aimed at removing discrimination against Dalits in all areas of life and also emphasised the need for special assistance, preference in appointments and special projects for social development.

57. In 2004, the TNBC re-launched it with concrete and specific initiatives and declared it as the Eight-point Programme for the Integrated Development and Empowerment of Dalit Catholics.

58. The Catholic Church has not carried on its work for the Dalits in isolation. Other agents also contributed to this faith journey. Among them, Dalit Christian Liberation Movement (DCLM), began in 1980s, forcefully brought the prevailing discriminatory caste practices and consciousness within the Church to the centre stage. The Christian Dalit Liberation Movement (CDLM) from other Churches also initiated debates on Dalit ideology, Dalit theology and Dalit spirituality to unite Dalit Christians, emphasising the biblical message: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28-29).

59. The CBCI also supported the National Council of Dalit Christians (NCDC), an organization initiated by the laity, working at the national level with grassroots linkages, especially for the equal rights of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims, along with the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) and Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI).

60. In the last three decades, the CBCI Commission for SC/ST/BC has organized several consultations, seminars and conferences for promoting the rights and development of Dalits and other marginalized communities in partnership with regional bodies of the CBCI, other Christian communities and likeminded faith-based and secular organizations. (Among these was the national seminar, “Building Inclusive Communities through Dalit Empowerment”, held at NBCLC, Bangalore, 6-8 March 2009.) Various animation programmes have helped in forming committed leadership, integrated development of Dalits/tribals and in fostering fraternity within the Church. An attempt has also been made

by the Commission to promote the education for development of Dalits to enter the civil services in the country.

61. Dalit Christians long for Biblical justice. Justice is central to the Biblical teaching. Biblical justice is the activity of God setting right what has gone wrong. “The Lord performs righteous deeds and judgements for all those who are oppressed” (Ps 103:6) This justice is the distinguishing characteristic of God in the Bible. Hence injustice and oppression are violation of God’s nature. In the New Testament, the Sermon on the Mount reaffirms this theme of justice (Mt 5:17-6:18). “The Gospels do not speak to us of justice simply as a human virtue, but as justice of the Kingdom, the source of which is God, and the violation of which is not social injustice, but above all a sin (an assault) against God.”<sup>21</sup>

## **IV. Biblical-Theological Basis for Building Inclusive Communities**

### **Programmatic Mission of Jesus of God’s Reign**

62. The programmatic summary of Jesus’ ministry runs as follows: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (Lk 4: 18-19 Cf. Is 61: 1-2). In proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favour, Jesus recalls to mind the jubilee year mentioned in the Book of Leviticus, chapter 25. It speaks about debts to be remitted, slaves to be set free and land sold or lost for any reason to be restored to the original owner in the envisaged jubilee year. The vision behind this is to build an egalitarian and an inclusive community of God’s reign, where God alone will be the Father and all others will be His children without any room for any kind of discrimination.

63. The Good News to the poor is the privileged place given to them in God’s reign. It is graphically brought out by Jesus in the Zacchaeus narrative that only in sharing out of love with the poor and restituting to the exploited for the injustice done to them, one enters into God’s reign. The effect of Zacchaeus’ dramatic encounter with Jesus was his real conversion (metanoia) in favour of the poor as he says, “.... I will pay back four times as much”. Then Jesus said to him, “Salvation has come to this house...”. (Lk 19: 8-10). One enters into the community of God’s reign only by sharing with and restitution to those sinned against namely the poor in general and Dalits in particular, who have suffered the stigma of untouchability inflicted on them.

64. The precursor John the Baptist preached social ethics of sharing with the poor and doing no injustice to them (Lk 3: 10-14). Baptised by John the Baptist, Jesus’ identification with the poor and the marginalised and the sinners brought him into great conflict with the rich, the powerful and the leadership of his time. This conflict finally led him to the cross.

## **The Christian Journey in Continuity with Jesus Event**

65. As disciples of Christ we have been called upon by the Lord of History to fight against the indifferent attitude and apathetic indolence towards the plight of Dalits (Rev 3:14-22; Ex 3:7-12) who have been excluded in all walks of life through the systemic evil of casteism and the sinful practice of untouchability. The God of compassionate justice sent his only beloved Son in our midst in continuity with the Exodus event accomplishing salvation of mankind giving us the fullness of life.
66. All these salvific interventions seeking to integrate all things and all people in Christ (Eph 1:10) are the continual divine efforts towards the creation of a New Heaven and a New Earth (Rev 21:1). In this project, all humans have been created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27; *Gaudium et Spes*, nn. 11, 29). Hence each of us has been bestowed with the divine gift of human dignity as our birthright. And if we have been immersed into the waters of baptism how could we simultaneously be immersed into the waters of casteism? If we are rooted in Christ, how could we bear the evil fruits of caste discrimination (Gal 3:26-28)?
67. In (2015) Declaring an Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, Pope Francis announced, “Mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy. The Church’s very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love.” (*Misericordiae Vultus* #10)

## **Faithful Justice of the Compassionate Lord**

68. The God of Holiness rejoices in the act of community building from all sectors of people irrespective of their creed, code, cult, colour, culture, or caste. All those who indulge in community-dividing in the name of tradition, religion, culture, and caste cannot find favour with the God of Justice. As per the demands of the Incarnational Intervention, all the pinnacles of power will be demolished, the valleys of emptiness will be filled in, and all those driven away by caste tyranny as “lesser humans” will be empowered as community builders. This is how the God of Assertive Justice and Faithful Righteousness will enable His people to relish the Eucharistic Communion with one and all.
69. The victims of untouchability and casteism are enslaved due to the ill-treatment meted out to their God-given human dignity. Those who reap the privileges of casteism are enslaved due to the deprivation of the God-given capacity to become co-humans with others. When the annihilation of the caste system would become a historical reality, both the victims and the caste-minded could exuberantly rejoice: “The Lord has done great things for us.” The other nations could also proclaim, “The Lord has done great things for them” (Ps 126:1-2).
70. Before cherishing the harvests of the splendorous glory of divine justice of creating a culture of communion, all of us need to be open to be transformed by God to rise against

the evils of casteism and the practice of untouchability in an organized way. This can bring suffering and pain. However, this could be considered as the ‘sowing in tears’ which would result in ‘songs of joy’ for the liberation of the oppressed (Cfr.Ps 126:4-6). The community-building Gospel and the community-dividing casteism are eternally incompatible. The God of Life and the Satan of Death can never shake hands as allies even temporarily. With this deep insight of divine courage and discerning wisdom let us hope that our genuine Christian compassion “may increase ever more and more” (Phil 1:9) for keeping on building inclusive communities by breaking every trace of casteism.

71. Our partnership with the Gospel of Christ (Phil 1:4) should never permit us to proceed with any tendency of lording it over others in the name of culture, caste, gender, or language (Mt 20:25-26). In the history of India, God has initiated great trends of strengthening the victims of untouchability and weakening of caste-based practices. May the Lord of History, who began this good work in us of interrogating, resisting, negating, and annihilating the immoral practice of untouchability and the evil practice of casteism bring this great deed to completion before Christ our Lord of Justice (Phil 1:6). And thus, the Word of God dispels powerfully the roots of prejudice, the fortresses of discrimination, customs of oppression, and conventions of domination.

### **Promoting an egalitarian Culture through the power of the Eucharist—and abolishing the Caste System**

72. The marginalized in the socio-cultural and politico-economic realms have often been dubbed as sinners (moral realm) by the Pharisaic-Brahminic cultures. But in the Eucharist such deplored lots are embraced as “my sheep” (Jn 10:1-15), “blessed are you who are poor (in spirit)” (Lk 6:20; Mt 5:3), and “little ones” (Mk 9:36-37).
73. The Samaritan women and men, relegated as untouchable creatures by the self-styled puritans, are looked upon by the Eucharistic ethos as respectable dialogical partners (Jn 4:1-42). The utmost humanitarian sensitivity of the “untouchable” Samaritan to reach out to the faceless and nameless victim on the roadside is emphasized in contrast to the self-designated “purity” of the Jewish priest and the Levite (Lk 10:25-37). Jesus’ sensitivity has the courage to publicly acknowledge the Samaritan’s spiritual dignity in gratefully acknowledging the gift of healing received from the divine (Lk 17:11-19).
74. When Jesus’ disciples wish to call “fire from heaven” over the Samaritans for not readily welcoming the people of Jewish origins into their villages, they are educated with a rebuke in line with the same ethos (Lk 9:51-55). Similarly, Jesus accepts the great faith of the gentile Canaanite woman and grants her petition (Mt 15:21-28; Mk 7:24-30). In the first Eucharist Jesus willingly offers himself to cleanse the dirty feet of the friends-to-be-sent-as-servants (Jn 13:1-11), emphasising that the “servants are not greater than the master” (Jn 15:20).

75. These Eucharistic life orientations are the antidotes to the existing diabolical systems of casteism and untouchability. All these dimensions of the Eucharistic commitment should inspire everyone to identify the divine elements operative in the most deprived namely Dalits in the Indian Church. In the light of the life-giving faith of the woman suffering from the evil of social death recognized by Jesus (“Daughter, your faith has made you well” – Mk 5:34), the Indian Church appreciates the faith of Dalits subjected to the evil of untouchability. The resurrection of the deadened creatures of the Indian caste-ridden society has to be the outcome of the Eucharistic intervention.

### **Breaking the Boundaries for Building Inclusive Communities**

76. In the conflict-ridden times of Jesus, the matrix of the intervention of the Eucharistic Lord is never on behalf of the power brokers like Herod the fox, the Torah-obsessed custodians of culture, the real estate owners, the pontificating intelligentsia, and the business-minded clergy of the Temple. Jesus rather stands for the wounded among the *ochlos* (literally, the crowd, multitude, common people and mob, referring to the unorganized and faceless masses of people whose relentless labour is awarded with only ignominy and anonymity) with no bargaining powers in all walks of life. Jesus created a new bond of union even with strangers and aliens by asking “Who are my mother and my brother?” (Mk 3:33) and by saying, “Woman, here is your son … Here is your mother” (Jn 19:26-27). These networks of organic relationship based on divine love transcend every form of biological, cultural, geographical, national, ethnic, and caste affiliations.
77. Our Saviour was crucified for being a pro-*ochlos* person by the organized infrastructure of the powers in alliance with *Mammon*, bowing to colonial hegemony, following the murderous traditions of a heartless judiciary, egged on by crowds of stooges, supported by a torturing military, and with conspiracy of a sadistic intelligentsia. These could not accept the message of unconditional love and forgiveness whose principal beneficiaries were the sinners, the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized. This was a heavy price paid by “the *logos*” (the Word) for pitching His” (meaning flesh or human nature), striking roots among “the most vulnerable”, disparagingly counted as “the most polluted” (Jn 1:14).
78. As stated by the second Vatican Council “*Today in many places we hear a call for greater security. But until exclusion and inequality in society and between peoples is reversed, it will be impossible to eliminate violence. The poor and the poorer peoples are accused of violence, yet without equal opportunities the different forms of aggression and conflict will find a fertile terrain for growth and eventually explode.*” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 59)

A way has to be found to do away with the culture of blaming Dalits and to demolish the attempts of perpetuating the practice of casteism and untouchability. This has to be replaced with the culture of humanitarian intervention and divine healing (Jn 9:1-7).

“In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound ... the principle of the common good immediately becomes a summons to build solidarity with the poorest of our brothers and sisters.” (*Laudato Si*, no. 158)

The Christian faith is not narrowly sacramental, or simply cultic, spiritual, and heaven-oriented. It simultaneously demands commitment to societal well-being, ensuring a community of human beings living in peace, justice and equality and thus prefiguring the heavenly city.

79. The egalitarian way of life and the inspiring table fellowship radically promoted by the Eucharist are betrayed by the practice of untouchability and the evil of casteism (Acts 2:42-47; 1 Cor 11:17-34). Social discrimination against the gentiles was nipped in the bud (Acts 10: 34 and 11: 18) in the early Christian communities. The dominant culture of lording it over others in the name of traditional culture is demolished by the culture of washing the feet of others, especially the least and the last (Mk 10:33-45; Jn 13:1-16). The Jubilee Year of Mercy seeks intervention of the compassionate love of God into our broken human history (Is 62:1-4; Lk 4:16-20) to promote creative justice for lasting reconciliation, with permanent healing in the New Heaven and New Earth (Is 11:1-9; Rev 21:1-8).

## V. Roadmap for the Future

80. The scheme of the Constitution reflects a three-pronged strategy for changing the status of Dalits based on the traditional social order. This consists of
- a. Protection from disabilities and enforcing punitive action against violence and discrimination;
  - b. Compensatory discrimination<sup>22</sup>, including reservation provisions in public services, representative bodies and educational institutions;<sup>23</sup> and
  - c. Development, to bridge the wide gap between the Scheduled Castes and other communities in their economic conditions and social status, covering allocation of resources and distribution of benefits.<sup>24</sup>

In the context of the State’s social and transitional<sup>25</sup> justice paradigm, the ethical imperative to devise vision-inspired roadmap in building the kingdom of God becomes all the more urgent for the Church in India.

81. In this regard, the CBCI asserts through this policy that the term ‘Dalit’ does not indicate a negative connotation or a caste identity. It rather seeks to restore an affirmative, humanizing and empowering identity which is a demand of our faith. Thus, it is not only a matter of sociological and cultural category but a theological category as well.

### **Rooted in the Gospel Values and Steered by the Constitutional Principles**

82. Dalit Christians keep alive the vision of God's reign for justice and love. They boldly call upon the Church to place justice and love, the core values of the Bible, at the heart of its mission. For without commitment to justice and love, there is no real and authentic knowledge of the biblical God (Jer 22:16; 1 Jn 4:7-8). The concepts such as right to development, human rights perspective, development for all, diversity and social inclusion, positive discrimination and linkage to human rights standards will help the Church to deepen its commitment in this regard.
83. Pope Francis calls for solidarity and preferential option for the poorest of the poor. Dalits are among the poorest of the poor. The Pope's call for common good as an ethical imperative vibrates with Dalits' struggles for an egalitarian society. The Pope notes:
- "... where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters. This option is in fact an ethical imperative for effectively attaining the common good." (Laudato si, 2015, No. 158)*
84. This is an invitation to all of us to experience communion and fellowship in the Church to make Jesus' prayer – that they all may be one – a living reality (Jn 17:21-23). The Church has to be ever open to this ideal in its thinking, proclamation and action. Engaging in Dalit Christian struggle to build an egalitarian society is a call and grace to the Church.

### **Equal Rights of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims**

85. Dalit Christians have remained faithful in the midst of hardships, obstacles and oppression because of their faith. They are several times discriminated against – by the secular State depriving them of the economic benefits on a purely religious basis in violation of Articles 15 and 25 of the Constitution and non-protection under the Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989. Yet, by and large, Dalit Christians heroically hold on to the Christian faith, the latest example being the Kandhamal massacre of Dalit and tribal Christians. It is the responsibility of the Church to work for equal rights of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims in collaboration with all citizens of goodwill who believe in secularism. All efforts must be made by the Church to attain this. From local to national and international levels, the entire Christian community has to get involved in the struggle, as faith-inspired prophetic action.

### **Reinforcing Educational and Economic Empowerment**

86. Education is a significant social indicator which has a bearing on the growth and achievement of an individual and the community as it enhances the employment opportunities and thereby improves the quality of life. Owing to lack of educational

opportunities, many Dalit Christians are vulnerable to exploitative employment. Most of them work in the unorganized sector or as contractual and daily labourers.

87. The new generation among Dalit Christians is searching for quality educational training and is ready to venture into new fields and seek employment opportunities. However, due to lack of guidance, motivation, training, and especially financial support, the dreams and aspirations of many of the youth are structurally nipped in the bud. It is time that at every level the Church administration makes available its resources for the educational and economic empowerment of Dalit Christians.

### **Developing Lay Leadership for Political Action**

88. Obtaining equal rights for Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims and abolition of practices of untouchability, discrimination and exclusion cannot be realized except through policy changes, and advocacy efforts with the State, bureaucracy, judiciary, media, and police. We have to develop a competent and cohesive leadership, comprising of women and men, to engage in such frontier missions of the Church. These leaders will be able to make a big difference at the grassroots, within the Church and at the national level reaching out to political and social forces.

### **Strengthening Implementation Strategies and Monitoring Mechanisms**

89. In order to do away with a major lacuna of the past, this policy is to be implemented with rigour. Those in governance structures are invited to create fair and just implementation strategies and monitoring mechanisms at the parish, vicariate, diocese, regional, and national levels.

### **Promoting Accountability and Transparency Mechanisms**

90. It is of great significance that we develop accountability and transparency mechanisms to ensure quality deliverables. Every Christian has the right to know the plans of the Church in this regard. By being transparent, we will allow ourselves to be constructively challenged by the faithful so that with dialogue and mutual understanding we will realize the plans we propose. It will be highly useful that all our plans and programmes reach all the Christians. We should also develop the practice of reporting to the people so that solidarity actions are strengthened for the benefit of all.

### **Building Solidarity Platforms to Strengthen the Common Good**

91. Solidarity has been described by Pope John Paul II as “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common goal” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* – SRS, 38). It begins with compassionate love which enables every Christian to enter into the inner world of Dalit sisters and brothers where they are broken, wounded, discriminated against, humiliated, lonely, not accepted and respected as equal human beings and assures them of being with them in their suffering. Compassionate love motivates one to understand the root causes scientifically and arouses them to righteous action. Love implies an absolute demand for justice – namely, recognition of the dignity and rights of one’s neighbour (*Justice in the World*, Synod of Bishops, 1971, No. 34).
92. Awakened by the universal love command of Jesus (Mk 12:28-34) a new awareness sets in to bear witness to the Gospel values, to see the world with the mind and heart of Jesus and to accept the liberating leadership of the marginalized to carry the Cross towards the joy of Easter with deep conviction. In solidarity with the awakened Dalits and people of goodwill, every Christian is asked to engage in continuous struggle against the sinful caste structure (SRS, 38), which becomes the common enemy not only of Dalits but of all humans. The common good is to understand, appreciate and believe that what is best for the last and the least in society – the Dalits – is the best for all humans.

### **Networking with People of Goodwill and Forging Alliances of the Marginalized**

93. Establishing God’s reign of justice in this world cannot be carried out solely by the Church. It has to work in partnership with faith-based and secular organizations and people of goodwill. All efforts must be made, from the local to the national level, to build strong networks across caste and religion and win over the goodwill of the people to join our just struggle for the dignity and rights of Dalits and Dalit Christians. Inclusive, democratic and collective leadership has to be promoted so that we are able to efficiently echo the voices of Dalit Christians in the corridors of the decision-makers at the state and national levels.
94. The resources – human, financial and institutional – are the patrimony of the poor. The Church is only a custodian of the resources, mandated to put to use with utmost care and concern for the creation and development of the excluded and alienated, with a preferential option for Dalit Christians and other deprived sections.
95. Alienated from livelihood resources, many migrate to the cities to eke out a living. How we should address the concerns of the distressed migrants, who are largely Dalits and *adivasis*, is emerging as a huge challenge nationally. To counter the anti-poor policies and programmes of successive governments, we need to proactively promote collaboration among NGOs, CBOs, Dalit Christians, Dalits in general, Adivasis, women, and minority movements and networks, environmental movements, solidarity platforms, civil and political rights campaign

groups, and human rights organizations to facilitate building of alliances of the discriminated and excluded communities. In all such endeavours, the last and excluded are to be given due place in the leadership.

## VI. Action Plan of the CBCI

96. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India declares that '*Caste discrimination is a grave social sin*' and commits itself to earnestly carry out the following:

- a. Untouchability practised in any form will not be tolerated within the Church. Intensive efforts will be made to abolish discriminatory and exclusionary practices in the Church, including any existing within the sub-castes of Dalit Christians. To this end, a scientific survey will be initiated to study prevailing practices (covert and overt) of untouchability and casteism in the Church at various levels.
- b. The CBCI Commission for SC/BC is mandated to take forward the policy to inspire, motivate and animate the entire Church in the country through the diocesan and regional structures and diocesan commissions.
- c. Efforts will be made to appoint competent and enthusiastic Dalit priests as secretaries for the SC/ST/BC commissions at the regional and diocesan levels. A lay Dalit person will also be appointed as Joint Secretary.
- d. A socio-economic caste census of Christians in India will be initiated by the CBCI, through the Office of SC/BC which would include data on religious men and women, priests and bishops.
- e. Interactive portal / helpline for the knowledge dissemination on possibilities, opportunities and resources for Dalits and for effective implementation and monitoring of planned programmes will be set up.
- f. The CBCI Office for SC/BC will be helped to set up a few scholarships at the national level to promote potential Dalit Christians to study abroad.
- g. Dedicated funds by Caritas India could be set up for the educational and economic empowerment of Dalit Christians and marginalized students.
- h. Advocacy with decision-makers, following up cases filed in the Supreme Court of India and facilitating the struggle to obtain equal rights for Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims will be pursued in collaboration with faith-based and secular organizations.
- i. Efforts for financial stability of the CBCI Office for SC/BC should be undertaken for its effective functioning and for the implementation of this policy.

## **VII. Recommendations**

97. Pope Francis stated, “Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs. For cultures are in fact quite diverse and every general principle... needs to be inculcated, if it is to be respected and applied” (AL, no 3).<sup>26</sup> It would only be fair and appropriate that each entity seriously takes up a study of the Dalit issues and chalks out ongoing programmes of action in consultation with different stakeholders and develop implementation, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms appropriate to their context and announce them in the public domain for greater involvement of every Christian and people of goodwill.
98. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India recommends the following to be implemented by the Regional Bishops’ Councils, Dioceses and Religious Orders;
- A. That every Diocese submits its short-term and long-term plans of action within one year of the promulgation of this policy to the Regional Bishops’ Council so that we as a Church move forward collectively and systematically in realizing the Gospel values.
  - B. **That Practices of Untouchability, Discrimination and Exclusion be forthwith abolished:**
    - a. Time-bound action plans are to be initiated by every diocese to abolish all forms of practices of untouchability, discrimination and exclusion, especially in places of worship and burial grounds.
    - b. If there are dual practices based on caste discrimination, such practices should be stopped forthwith. In case of failure to do so, stringent measures should be taken by the Church authority concerned.
    - c. All youth and women in the Church are to be educated about the history, politics and the socio-economic aspects behind the origins and practices of caste in the Church and in the larger society.
  - C. **That special attention be given at all levels for the promotion and care of Vocations to priesthood and religious life from the Dalit community:**
    - a. Systems and mechanisms are to be put in place to promote vocations from Dalit Christians in the dioceses and in religious orders. While vocation promotion is a ministry of everyone in the Church, to facilitate vocations from Dalits it would be appropriate to have vocation promoters from among Dalit Christians. It is important to have vocation promoters who understand the background and cultural sensitivity of Dalits and ability to accompany the young from school days.
    - b. Vocation promotion camps should be organized at nodal places where Dalit Christians live in big numbers.

**D. That there be Participative and Inclusive Administration and Transparency in Governance:**

- a. Proportionate representation has to be given to Dalit Christians in Parish Councils, Diocesan Councils and in all Church bodies. The voice of Dalits must be heard in all decision-making bodies in the local Christian communities. Similar representation is also to be given in education board, finance committee, recruitment board, etc.
- b. As a sign of affirmative action, just representation is to be promoted and ensured in different leadership and executive roles in the Church. Such affirmative actions are to be implemented in various decision-making bodies of religious orders as well.
- c. All the schemes and programmes chalked out by the dioceses are to be monitored. Monitoring, documenting and reporting mechanisms are to be worked out by every region and diocese to gauge the progress made and every year reports are to be presented in the Regional and Diocesan level Meetings.
- d. Financial budgeting social audit, specially with regard to the welfare of the Dalits in our institutions and other ventures is to be carried out every year to help assess, monitor and give feedback about how far success has been achieved in empowering Dalit Christians.
- e. Documents and reports could be uploaded on the diocesan websites to promote transparency and accountability. Each Diocese could also publish a list of all beneficiaries, including Dalit Christians and other marginalized people, in its annual publications.

**E. That Liturgical and Para-liturgical Concerns of the Dalits be attended to:**

- a. Dalit music, dance, folklore, stories, literature, proverbs, myths, legends, and aesthetic expressions contain liberating and counter-cultural values. Through a time bound comprehensive study the rich cultural heritage of the Dalits should be integrated in liturgical and para-liturgical celebrations.
- b. Equal and respected participation of Dalit Christians, especially of women, is to be furthered in liturgical and para-liturgical celebrations.
- c. The reality of caste and its contradiction with Christ's vision of building a casteless society is to form part of the Catechism and must be taught to Christians from childhood onwards. In this connection, suitable modifications may be necessary in the catechetical directory of India and catechetical syllabus.
- d. Efforts should be made to appoint Dalit Christians as catechists so that the children and the young are taught to transcend caste and to cherish the values of God's Kingdom.

**F. That special interest be taken in the Formation of Clergy and Religious:**

- a. The seminarians and religious in formation houses must be given courses and programmes for sensitization of evils of caste and change of mindset. They must be trained to give relevant homilies and sermons, and conduct meaningful liturgy for the liberation of all Christians from the caste system.
- b. At every stage of the formation of the clergy and religious, appropriate courses on Dalit and tribal identity, history, culture, and theology are to be included as part of their curriculum.
- c. It is highly recommended that these subjects are taught by formators who are from Dalit and tribal communities, or have worked among them and have concrete experiences of untouchability and discrimination. As far as possible, at every level of formation, it is important to have a pool of formators from Dalit community.

**G. That Dalit Women and Children be accorded their due space:**

- a. “The feminine genius is necessary in all expressions of the life of the Church and of society”, said Pope Francis while meeting with the Superiors Generals. Where reservation is provided for Dalits in education and employment in Catholic Institutions, 50 per cent has to be reserved for Dalit Catholic women.
- b. Dalit women have to be ensured equal participation in the decision-making bodies at the diocesan, regional and national level.
- c. Provisions for financial aid at all levels should be made for the educational development of Dalit children and women.
- d. Special attention is to be paid to the formation of Dalit children through various Church-related activities to ensure that they grow up with dignity and self-worth.

**H. That programs for Youth Development among Dalits be initiated:**

- a. Creative and innovative programmes are to be chalked out to train Dalit youth in every diocese and build a vibrant Catholic Dalit youth movement to tackle caste based discriminations and atrocities.
- b. SC/ST/BC Commissions of the dioceses, in partnership with the CRI, could organise workshops and courses to train Dalit Christian youth, men and women, in leadership, personality development, soft skills and entrepreneurship skills to enhance self-esteem, self-confidence and self-reliance.
- c. Training of Dalit youth in journalism and social media would help them to expose in the public domain injustices meted out to Dalits.
- d. At the level of dioceses, career guidance and employment centres could be set up to link up Dalit youth with various employment opportunities available in government and private sectors.

e. In the same manner, special attention is to be given to shape the minds of all Christian youth to fight against casteism, communalism, consumerism and the negative impact of the market economy. The youth are to be animated to understand that violence and discrimination against Dalits is essentially a human rights issue.

**I. That Dalit Leaders be empowered to Strengthen People's Movements:**

- a. The lay leadership from among Dalit men and women is to be developed to facilitate and strengthen Dalit movements.
- b. Systematic training in various skills and capacities is to be imparted to understand, analyse, network and advocate for the elimination of practices of untouchability, discrimination and exclusion.

**J. That Social Consciousness be created and Social Relations be strengthened:**

- a. Special attention and care should be given to sub-groups among Dalits in all the trainings, admissions, appointments and entrepreneurship endeavours.
- b. Inter-caste marriages are to be encouraged and given special incentives in the parishes and in the dioceses, thus providing signs of recognition.
- c. Happy mixing of Christians belonging to different castes could be facilitated through seminars, get-togethers, leadership sessions, cultural programmes, and liturgies to mould all Christians to bring about a drastic change in mindset and attitudes.

**K. That Educational Empowerment of the Dalits becomes a priority:**

- a. Adhering to the All India Catholic Education Policy, 2007, all Christians are to be admitted in the schools, colleges and technical educational institutions run by the Church and religious orders.
- b. Special consideration is to be given to Dalit Christians in admission to English medium, CBSE schools and in job-oriented and technical courses which are in demand.
- c. Follow-up and supplementary educational programmes are to be conducted in the rural and urban educational institutions to reduce the number of dropouts and support Dalit Christian students.
- d. Adequate financial support mechanisms are to be worked out to sponsor and provide financial assistance to Dalit Christians. To this end, an Education Fund for Dalit Christians could be set up in every diocese. Every year the list of beneficiaries could be published.
- e. Dalit Christians are in greater need of opportunities in higher education. Appropriate mechanisms are to be created to make it possible for Dalit youth to secure admissions in higher education, especially in the professional educational institutions such as

engineering, medical and management studies. In Catholic institutions proportionate number of seats should be reserved for Dalits.

- f. Hostel facilities are to be provided for Dalit students in major cities, especially those who pursue undergraduate and postgraduate education. Every diocese could plan and begin residential facilities to promote education of Dalit students in major cities and towns where the Church or the religious orders do not have higher educational institutions to support Dalit students from rural areas, especially women.
- g. Meritorious Dalit Christian students could be guided to pursue higher education in Catholic universities abroad. Such students could also be helped to find sponsors through the contacts of the Church or as inter-diocesan collaboration with dioceses abroad.
- h. Under the auspices of the Regional Bishops' Council, Special Educational Training Centres could be established to promote Dalit students to enter into central government services such as IAS, IPS, IFS, etc., and for the state public services.
- i. A Dalit professionals' forum could be initiated to plan and implement Dalit educational and empowerment programmes.

#### **L. That Dalits be encouraged in Employment and Entrepreneurship:**

- a. Systematic efforts should be made at the local and state levels to facilitate Dalit Christians to access government welfare schemes, scholarships and other privileges.
- b. Proportionate representation is to be ensured to the eligible Dalit Christian candidates in jobs, at all levels, in all Christian institutions.
- c. The seniority list with due consideration to merit should be strictly adhered to in appointments and promotions.
- d. Every year a reasonable budget should be earmarked for creating Dalit Christian entrepreneurship and skills training at the diocesan level.
- e. To promote entrepreneurship among Dalit Christians, proportionate number of contracts, such as construction works, running canteens, in shopping complexes, in providing uniforms and notebooks could be given to Dalit Christians.
- f. At the Diocesan level, Financial Development Limited Companies could be initiated to promote entrepreneurship among Dalit Christians.
- g. Job-oriented technical and skills education linked to employability opportunities in the market could be promoted.
- h. Shelter is one of the basic needs of Dalit Christians. Schemes need to be developed to help those Dalits living under thatched roofs to live in dignified housing conditions.

## **M. That Grievance Redressal and Peace-building mechanisms be established:**

- a. Liberating sacraments should never be used as a means to punish people, especially Dalits. Refusal to give communion and blocking people from entering the church to punish them due to misunderstandings, personal grievances, unsettled disputes and such other things is not Christian. Such actions should be stopped forthwith by addressing the issue in a properly empowered forum.
- b. A regional grievance redress mechanism is to be set up to address grievances related to practices of untouchability and caste-based discrimination that come up from dioceses in that region.
- c. Similarly, each diocese will set up redress mechanisms to address the issues of caste-based discrimination and non-implementation of Dalit policy and programmes of the Catholic Church of India. This structure will involve the Chairperson of the SC/ST/BC Commission, secretaries of education and Diocesan Social Service Society (DSSS), and other qualified members.
- d. In all peace-building process of caste conflicts, participation of Dalits and Dalit women along with the other parties is to be ensured.

## **VIII. Review and Monitoring**

99. Effective implementation of the Policy of Dalit Empowerment depends upon the commitment of every Christian and the Church leaders and their taking responsibility for the success of the policy. For this, proper internal monitoring mechanisms and evaluation at various levels is indispensable
100. An internal monitoring team should be formed at every level from parish to the national level. At all diocesan levels, the team will be appointed by the local ordinary to whom the monitoring team should report. At the regional and National level, the respective Chairman Bishop of the SC/BC Commission will be responsible for the monitoring team. At all levels the team should have members from the SC/ST/BC Commission cells, Commission secretary and CRI representatives.
101. At least once in six months the monitoring team will meet at the vicariate (Deanery) level and once in a year at the diocesan, regional and national level. The vicariate team will send the report of the meeting to the local ordinary for further action. Similarly, the reports of the regional meetings need to be sent to the CBCI Office for SC/BC for record and follow up action if necessary.
102. The monitoring committees will assess and evaluate the implementation of Dalit policy and whether the recommendations and programs are procuring the desired results.

103. Annual report of the monitoring and evaluation committees of diocesan, regional and national level ought to be made available for greater visibility and accountability.

## **IX. Conclusion**

104. Empowered by the Word of God, the Church in the world has been striving to grow in the Lord as a community-building community, a united, well-harmonized and integrated community in tune with the heartbeat of the same Lord of History. God's definite option for the marginalized leads to the universal salvation, offering the fullness of life to all. This salvific way of growing pure and blameless for the day of Christ in the Indian context will fill us with the fruits of compassionate justice, joyful communion and righteous fellowship born out of the Spirit for the glory and praise of God (cf. Phil 1:9-11). The CBCI policy for Dalit Empowerment seeks to ensure that all sections of society equally feel the call to enjoy the love, mercy and compassion of the creator who has made every human being in His own image and likeness.
105. "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are" (1 Cor 1:27-29). All those who have been counted as untouchable and polluted by the mindsets of the power centres are the privileged medium of divine revelation. It is through these despised lots that the inclusive culture of embracing every human as co-human is manifestly expressed by the divine. *Kairos* (the privileged moment of Divine Grace) will be born when we struggle together to create a new society where all of us will be the Children of One God as One People in the Church in India. This is possible only by way of removing every trace of mindset and discrimination based on casteism. Let us make a solemn pledge as Disciples of Christ to create a new society free from casteism. The God of Compassionate Justice, Jesus Christ- love made incarnate, the Holy Spirit the Giver of Wisdom, together with Mary our Mother, will walk together and join hands with us in our journey towards the fullness of life with abundant joy (Mt 28:20).

### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom*, Orbis Books, NY, 2003, p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> Address to group of Bishops from Tamil Nadu, India, on 17 November 2003.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article3975.html>

<sup>4</sup> From various sources and the National Human Rights Commission Report on the Prevention of Atrocities against Scheduled Castes, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. para 93 of NHRC Report 2010 for the three-pronged approach.

<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive reading, cf. the K.B. Saxena Report to the NHRC.

<sup>7</sup> For disabilities experienced by Dalit Christians, see, for example, *Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin in India, Study of their Socio- Economic, Cultural and Political Status* (Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies, New Delhi, 2013).

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<sup>8</sup> M.S.S. Pandian in *State, Christianity and Scheduled Castes* (1985) Jose Kananaikal in *Scheduled Caste Converts and Social Disabilities: A Survey of Tamil Nadu* (1990) and *Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin* (1983) (Indian Social Institute, New Delhi) have claimed that grave discrimination is practised among Christians

<sup>9</sup> The number of Scheduled Caste students in Church-run colleges was only 7.8 per cent and that of Scheduled Tribes was 5.2 per cent in the total 271 colleges.

<sup>10</sup> *Dalits in the Muslim and Christian Communities: A Status Report on Current Social Scientific Knowledge*, prepared for the National Commission for Minorities, Government of India, by Satish Deshpande and Geetika Bapna, 2008, p. 78. The National Sample Survey Organisation 61st Round sample for the rural and urban sectors (2004-2004) states that among the Christians in India, 30.1 per cent of Dalit Christians live below poverty line compared to 13.9 per cent OBCs living below poverty line in Rural India. Among the Christians 32.3 per cent of Dalit Christians live below poverty line compared to 13.0 per cent of OBC Christians living below poverty line in Urban India.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.35.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.78.

<sup>13</sup> Out of 20 million Christians in India, about 14 million (nearly 70 per cent) are of Dalit origin. Cf. S.M. Michael, “Dalit Encounter with Christianity: Change and Continuity” in S.M. Michael, *Christianity and Cultures: Anthropological Insights for Christian Mission in India* (ISPCK, Delhi and Ishvani Kendra, Pune, 2015), pp. 64- 94.

<sup>14</sup> Out of about 180 bishops in India only 12 (6.6 per cent) are from Dalit community: two in Tamil Nadu, five in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, one in Gujarat, three in Odisha, and one in Maharashtra. Among the Major Superiors 12 out of 822 are from Dalit community. Priests from Dalit community are about 1,130 (4.2 per cent) out of 27,000 and religious are about 4,500 (4.5 per cent) out of 100,000.

<sup>15</sup> *International Dalit Solidarity Network Annual Report, 2010*.

<sup>16</sup> See Sukhadeo Thorat and Katherine S. Newman (eds.), *Blocked by Caste, Economic Discrimination in Modern India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Fr John Baptist Trincol, Fr Caussanal, Bishop Peter Leonard, Blessed Kunjachan of Ramapuram showed exemplary courage in opposing discriminatory caste practices in the Church.

<sup>18</sup> Dr B.R. Ambedkar wrote: “If there exists caste and other forms among Christian converts it is the result of this policy – the policy of making Christianity easy. In adopting this policy, the Missionaries never thought that someday, somebody would ask them ‘What good is Christianity for a Hindu if it does not do away with his caste?’ They misunderstood their mission and thought that making a person Christian was the same thing as making him a follower of Christ.” (Cf. Dr. Ambedkar, “Christianizing the Untouchables”, Vol. 5, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar’s Writings and Speeches* (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra).

<sup>19</sup> Today the CBCI has a separate Secretariat for Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes and a Committee for Tribal Affairs headed by a designated person.

<sup>20</sup> The Constitution (Scheduled Caste) Order 1950, popularly known as the Presidential Order, in para 3 stipulates that “no person who professes a religion different from Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism shall be deemed to be a member of Scheduled Caste.”

<sup>21</sup> Galilea Segundo, *The Future of Our Past*, Quezon City, Claretian Publications, 1980, p. 47.

<sup>22</sup> Compensatory discrimination is also called positive discrimination or affirmative action.

<sup>23</sup> This includes making provisions for the reservation of posts in public services through recruitment and promotion, reservation of seats in the legislative bodies at the central, state and Panchayat Raj institutions and municipal bodies, and reservation of seats in admission to educational and professional institutions, including relaxation of eligibility qualifications. This was done with a view to ensuring that Dalits have their share in positions of power and decision-making as also access to opportunities for higher education.

<sup>24</sup> This plan was operationalized through allocation of funds and earmarking of benefits under various development programmes such as Special Component Plan (Scheduled Caste Sub Plan) and Tribal Sub Plan.

<sup>25</sup> Kofi Annan, a former Secretary General of the United Nations, defines transitional justice as “the full set of processes and mechanisms associated with a society’s attempts to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuse, in order to secure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation.”

<sup>26</sup> *Amoris Laetitia*, No 3 and *Gaudium et Spes*, 44.