

Poverty, Simplicity of life

Sister Sujita Kallapurakkathu

Extracts from a talk by Indian-born Superior General of the Notre Dame Sisters, Mary Sujita, delivered to the delegates of the Brothers' 2007 General Chapter. She asserts that two things will ensure the survival of religious orders, the second of which touches on a subject which has been discussed in recent issues of Lasallians.

We religious have co-opted many values of the world in the name of efficiency, prudence and common sense. We know that Jesus was not particularly known for His prudence, efficiency or strategic planning.

To live in Christian religious communities is to live counter-culturally in a society that places great importance on individual pursuits and comforts, material possessions and conveniences. True communion is possible when we risk moving out of our comfort zones to be incarnated in the messiness of our own local community as well as in the messiness of the society outside. But we often squander our consecrated energies to make ourselves comfortable and secure as individuals and communities!

As young sisters we worked among the poor. It was this experience that gave us the inner freedom to keep going forward although we lacked even the very basic facilities like clean drinking water, toilets, bathing facilities, a little room of our own, electricity and such things which are considered the basic necessities of daily living. Sharing the lot of the poor, even periodically, nurtures compassion in us and propels us to work for justice and peace in solidarity with them.

Sharing the lot of the poor day after day can indeed be a powerful eye opener for us who take it for granted that having middle class (or even higher still!) comforts and conveniences is our right, part of our promised hundredfold because we have left everything for the sake of Jesus! It may be a very revealing exercise to reflect with utmost honesty, consequent to saying YES to our call to consecrated life, what we have really left behind and what we have taken in as our entitlement.

Most of our active apostolic religious congregations are known for their big and efficient institutions of education, health care, social service and other works of charity. How often are we known for counter-cultural living? Asking disturbing questions first among ourselves, within the Church and in the society is the beginning of the desired transformation. Have we not become domesticated, invisible, lost in the madness of individualism, neo-liberalism

and the need to find personal fulfilment and at times institutional fulfilment? Do we religious have an identity that is visible and credible? The testimony of our life as we live it today is perhaps of no significance to our world. Why are we attracting only very few new vocations? Over-concern for personal security and comfort is a growing problem among religious of all age groups. I sincerely hope that we religious even in our old age will continue our witnessing presence among the people to the very end rather than opting for comfort, privacy and extra special care (which is the privilege of a secure middle class) that we expect as part of our "hundredfold" for having left all things for Christ!

Where have you found prophecy and risk-taking in your personal life, community and in the congregation during the past five years?

Reflecting on educators, Fr. Arrupe, SJ said in 1973: "The students, their families, our colleagues, all have the right to see us as integrated, to see no division between what we teach, what we say, and how we live. And we have an obligation to respond to this need. We are being hypocritical if we warn our students about the consumer mentality while we live lives that are secure and comfortable..."

Indeed students see us as professionally competent, excellent managers, organizers, selfless and committed workers, competent and generous. Do they also see us as very secure people living a comfortable middle class life, having everything?

Our education must be impacted by the fact that a two-thirds majority of the world's population lives in chronic hunger without clean drinking water and over ten million children die each year due to malnutrition and disease.

Yes, there is a crisis in religious life. A particular way of living religious life/consecrated life is dying and part of it is already dead! Do we perceive this as the end of religious life or as the work of the Spirit who makes all things new? Our response to it will make this crisis the turning point of consecrated life in this new millennium or the closing point of consecrated life! We religious of the third millennium may not and cannot take the middle ground of security if we are to collaborate with the Spirit in the birth of a hope-filled future for consecrated life

"If the religious vow of Poverty were lived seriously and consistently by every member of the congregation, no matter when or where the congregation found itself now or in the future, its spirituality, its community life, its ministry, and its witness would effectively challenge the world" (Sandra Schneider)