

**Memorandum Submitted by Catholic Women to Cardinal Oswald Gracias,
Archbishop of Bombay, President of Catholic Bishops' Conference of India
& Advisor to Pope Francis.**

Dated 8th March 2020.

Dear Cardinal Oswald,

Warm Greetings from the Catholic Women/Men in India.

As we join hands with women around the globe to celebrate another International Women's Day and take stock of women's place in the world today, we thought it opportune to also examine the status of women in the Catholic Church, particularly in India.

Over the years the Catholic bishops of India have supported the empowerment of women in many ways, through education, including theological training, healthcare, promoting participation in self-governance, legal aid, income generation schemes, and other sustainable development programmes. These initiatives have had a tremendous impact on the women of India, particularly in rural areas.

Looking within

Within the church however, not much has changed. Every year we celebrate International Women's Day with the full support of the bishops and clergy, but the concerns and frustrations of women within the church remain the same. We have leadership training for women but there are no spaces for women to exercise this leadership. Doors have been opened for women to contribute their services in pastoral work, as community leaders in SCCs, as Eucharistic Ministers, Lectors, Cantors, Ushers, and leaders in outreach activities in the parish, yet their ministries are not valued as much as, or given as much recognition as the ministry of ordained deacons, from which women, including women religious, are banned. That women persist in their ministries and continue to fill the pews despite this very visible discrimination, is a sign both of their love for the Church, and their internalisation of their second class status in the Church.

At the level of governance once again, women are excluded. While the Gender Policy brought out by the CBCI in 2010 is a path breaking document that "rejects all types of discrimination against women as being contrary to God's intent and purpose (G.S.#29)", women continue to be discriminated against by keeping them out of decision making bodies of the Church, which are controlled by clerics. Women have no say in the policy making that shapes the liturgy, worship, theology and practices of the church, including those that affect their own lives.

At the synods of bishops women may be invited and even have a voice, but they have no vote. Non-ordained, religious brothers are given the vote, while consecrated women religious are not. What does this say to the world? That only men have the intelligence and the authority to guide the church? That when the "two or three" gathered in the name of Christ include women, the Spirit speaks only to the men?

The issue of clergy sexual abuse and the way it is handled by Church authorities is another matter of concern. Once again, in the Gender Policy the Indian bishops commit themselves to fighting all forms of violence to women, but the norms to deal with sexual harassment in the workplace do not mention measures that will be taken to address clergy sexual abuse. Experience has shown that women victims are often not believed, and their clerical abusers use the power of the Church to protect themselves. They continue in their ministry while survivors are ostracised, vilified, and left to languish from the wounds of the abuse and injustice in the Church.

In the past few years women religious across the world have been emboldened to speak out against the servitude that frequently marks their life in the Church. They have exposed spiritual abuse of the Eucharist by priests who make it conditional to the women's subservience. They have drawn attention to their unpaid labour in the church and the lack of appreciation of their intellect. They have expressed powerlessness before their bishops who make unreasonable demands of their congregations and even appropriate their land and institutions.

When it comes to worship, once again women are discounted. Feminist theologians have pointed out that women's books, women's experiences and women's accomplishments have been largely overlooked in the assigned scripture readings that are being proclaimed in our churches on Sundays, or they are relegated to weekdays, where only a small number of churchgoers will hear them, or are designated as optional. Readings are used to reinforce qualities of submission and subservience as being "proper" for women. Passages containing positive references to women are left out of the lectionary while those containing negative references are retained. Even the sanctoral cycle has a disproportionate ratio of male to female saints.

Call for change

On this day, 8th March 2020, therefore:

We call for equality in the Catholic Church;

We seek changes in the policies, practices and structures of the Church so that women can participate fully in the life and leadership of the church;

We advocate for a prophetic Church, where women's voices count;

We demand respect from the clergy in their communication with women; and

We urge religious authorities to recognise, admit and address power and sexual abuses in the Church.

Signs of hope

Your recent NCR interview (21 February 2020) encourages us to believe that you support our vision of an egalitarian Church (Gal 3:28).

In the interview you acknowledged a bias among the members of the Catholic Church's all-male hierarchy, against giving women more leadership roles, and admitted that you and your peers must "shed this prejudice."

You identified yourself as "an advocate for women's rights in the church" and a "convert" to the cause of women seeking a greater role in decision-making in the Church.

You affirmed the apostolate of women and the responsibilities they shoulder in the Church, and rued the fact that there is no recognition of women's contribution, "which is their right".

You strongly supported Pope Francis' efforts to address clergy sexual abuse including mandating that all priests and members of religious orders worldwide report any suspicions of abuse, and abolishing the use of the "pontifical secret" in abuse cases.

In conclusion you have rightly pointed out that, "If anything is affecting the church, all of us must put our shoulder to the wheel, all of us helping together, consistently looking for new systems."

As we begin the season of Lent in preparation for the resurrection, like Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, on that early Easter morning, we women too are asking each other, "Who will roll the stone away?" (Mark 16: 2,3).

As President of the C.B.C.I. and one of the six members of Pope Francis' advisory Council of Cardinals it is our hope that it will be you.

Endorsed by:

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