

# **Lay Catechists in the Syro-Malabar Church**

The Church or the ecclesial community is the basic agent of catechesis. Besides the Church as a whole, all the members of the Christian community are called to share in this ministry by being witnesses to the faith in a special way. Together with priests, religious and parents, a good number of lay catechists are also rendering valuable whole hearted service in the field of catechesis in the Syro-Malabar Church. The Church considers their service with great respect and recognizes them as special ministers of the community. The vocation of the laity to catechetical ministry springs from the sacrament of baptism, and they are strengthened and sent for the same by the sacrament of confirmation (*GDC* 231). Through these sacraments, they participate in the prophetic, priestly, and kingly ministries of Christ. According to St. Paul, the Lord has established different ministries in the Church. All the ministries in the Church are for the building up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-13). Therefore, by their valuable service lay catechists are actually participating in the building up of the Church.

In the early times of the Church, faith was handed down from one generation to the next mainly through community and family centred catechesis and by means of liturgical celebrations, catechetical instructions, and customary practices. Catechetical instruction was given to adults along with the liturgical celebrations, while children were given special instructions either before or after Holy Mass and this was done by the parish priest himself. They were asked to recite and memorize the basic prayers of the Church. Among the liturgical celebrations, the celebration of feasts also played an important role in the transmission of faith. Feasts were celebrated at community and family level. The instruction on the importance of the celebration of the feasts was given by the parents. Therefore the term catechist or lay catechist was not familiar among the St. Thomas Christians at this period. After the arrival of the Western missionaries, the catechetical system of the St. Thomas Christians began to develop into a formal and systematic one. The informal way of handing down the faith was changed to a formal and

systematic one, and the liturgy centred catechesis was changed to an instruction oriented one. From then onwards the demands for catechists rose in the Syro-Malabar Church.

Actually it was St. Francis Xavier who introduced the term lay catechist in India for the first time. One of the greatest catechetical contributions of Francis Xavier to the Church in India was the institution of the lay catechist, as a helper of the missionaries. In fact, it was about this time that the qualification “lay” was applied to the “catechist”. The training of the local catechists was one of his main concerns wherever he went. The absence of expected missionary reinforcements, led Francis Xavier to organize an institution of catechists to care for the small, scattered Christian communities. These catechists were an invaluable help. He was very conscious about their training and gave them all the necessary religious instructions. With a view to uniformity in catechetical method, Francis Xavier published the “*Instructio pro Catechesis*” (1545), in which he described his method of teaching the catechism and gave it as a rule to his helpers. Thus the role of lay catechists was officially inaugurated in the ministry of catechesis in India. We have already seen that St. Francis Xavier had a close contact with the St. Thomas Christians and his missionary activities had an influence on them. Therefore there may also have been lay catechists among the St. Thomas Christians. But unfortunately there is no historical evidence available pointing to the service of the lay catechists adopted in the ministry of catechesis in the Syro-Malabar Church till the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was a new adaptation in the ministry of catechesis in Syro-Malabar Church. Therefore this may not have had much influence among the St. Thomas Christians.

“Syro-Malabar Church can boast of having one of the best catechetical systems in the entire Catholic world. Organized efforts for the catechesis of children are made in all the parishes of the Church.” As we have seen earlier, attached to every parish there is a school to give catechetical formation to the students. This school functions on Sundays. “Among the St. Thomas Christians the term “Catechist” is understood in its narrow sense-the religion teachers of Sunday school. Therefore they are usually called *Sunday School Teachers*”. The role of the catechist in the Syro-Malabar Church is to give

formation to the students in this school. They are a group of unpaid teachers, with or without formal systematic training.

In the KCBC meeting of January 11, 1968 there was a discussion regarding the lay catechists. The main suggestions raised in the discussion were regarding the salary of the catechists and their basic training. This was the first Church level discussion conducted in Kerala regarding the catechists. The suggestion regarding the salary was never materialized, and now catechists render their services voluntarily to the community. From this discussion onwards the Kerala Church began to think about the formation of her catechists.

### **Formation of Lay Catechists in the Syro-Malabar Church**

Catechists in the Syro-Malabar Church are usually selected by the parish priests. They are to be from practicing Catholic families, and must have a good reputation in the parish community. For their selection the common criterion followed is whether they are practicing their faith than their theological studies. Most of the catechists come from good families. So they are people who experience the life of faith in their families. This does not mean that they do not need any formation for their catechetical ministry. In former days they were given sufficient training by the parish priests themselves or experts were arranged to come to the parish church to give the necessary guidance to the selected candidates for the ministry. Later it becomes the shared duty of the diocesan catechetical director and the parish priests. The parish priests would ask the diocesan director to send persons to train the catechists. Later catechetical formation centres and animation teams came into existence in almost all the dioceses.

After the establishment of the POC, the training of the catechists has taken on a new shape. Courses are offered to make the catechists competent for their catechetical ministry. Appreciating the progress in Kerala, Fr. D. S. Amalorpavadass, the pioneer of the Indian Catechetical movement, said: "It is no flattery to say that a miracle is happening in Kerala. The Church has started moving resolutely towards a radical renewal of Christian life in the region". One of the decisions of the All Kerala Catechetical

Meeting of 1968 was that “the best scholars available in the dioceses and religious congregations should be secured to staff the POC”. Thus POC offers a one year course in scripture, theology, philosophy, liturgy, catechetics, sociology...etc. Media education programmes and various psychological training programmes are also conducted here. As we have seen earlier the Kerala Church is somewhat unique. Here there are three particular individual Churches. Hence there was criticism that in the training programme of the POC, there was no stress on the heritage, liturgy and spirituality of any of the particular Churches of Kerala. Though the idea of the pioneers was to have a common training institute for all the three Churches in Kerala, some bishops later did not show interest in sending their students to the POC. Gradually the formation of catechists became more of a diocesan affair.

At present all the dioceses have well equipped catechetical centres with trained resource teams, under the guidance of a diocesan director. These centres organize two types of training programmes for catechists, basic training programmes and ongoing formation programmes. The ‘Basic Catechetical Teachers Course’ (BCTC) or ‘Catechist Training Programme’ (CTP) is mainly intended for beginners. Ongoing formation is given with the intention of helping the catechists to meet the day to day needs in their catechetical ministry.

It is true that to a certain extent the above said BCTC and CTP programmes help the catechists to get formation in the ministry of catechesis at the diocesan level. But there is no organized system or programme for their formation for the whole Church. The result is that some of these catechists are not so much capable of explaining the catechism and also the faith formation of the growing generation. The recently published catechetical directory of the Syro-Malabar Church, ‘*Call and Response*’, also points to the importance of the basic formation of catechists in the Church. Though the structure of the synodal commission for catechesis is formed, its functioning is not yet started.

## **Issues and Challenges Regarding the Formation of Lay Catechists in the Syro-Malabar Church Today**

Everybody agrees that it is important to give at least a basic formation to the catechists either before one is appointed as a catechist or in the first year of service. But it is not an easy task to give sufficient training to them. Here, I will try to mention some issues and challenges regarding the formation of the lay catechists in the Syro-Malabar Church in Kerala. I have had an opportunity to work as a forane/regional catechetical director for two years. During this period I tried to conduct some kind of training programmes for the catechists. On the basis of that experience and also the contact with various diocesan directors we are drafting the existing challenges in the formation of lay catechists.

1. *Economic problems:* It is not an easy task to raise funds for the training of the catechists. Catechists may not have interest to paying for their training programmes because after this training they are to give voluntary service for the community.
2. *Non-availability of time:* In the Syro-Malabar Church there are no full-time catechists. They are occupied with their own job and other duties. Therefore it is not an easy task to find time for their formation.
3. *Disinterest on the part of some trainees:* In the Syro-Malabar Church in Kerala all the catechists are giving voluntary service. Therefore they may not have any interest to participate the training programmes. Moreover, they are not so much conscious of the importance of this formation in their ministry.
4. *Disinterest on the part of some Parish priests:* Though not all, there are a few Parish priests consider these training programmes useless. They think that the catechists are teaching the children and they have more knowledge than the children; therefore a special training programme is not so important. Hence, to a certain extent disinterest on the part of the parish priests is also a problem for this training programme.
5. *Disinterest of the parish community:* To a certain extent it is true that the parish community is also not fully serious about the catechetical ministry and the training of their Catechists.

6. *Diversity within the group of the catechists itself:* Sometimes there is much diversity among the catechists themselves in the same parish, regarding the intellectual abilities, education standards, age level, social status, etc. Because of this diversity some of them are not so interested to participating with others in the training programmes. It is not an easy task to conduct training programmes for the catechists as in the case of secular teachers.

7. *Non availability of resource persons:* It is not an easy task to find well educated resource persons to conduct training programmes in every region.

8. *Motivation:* All the catechists are not really motivated for this ministry. Some are coming with some prior ambitions.

9. *Lack of a systematic approach:* It is true that to a certain extent there are different kinds of training programmes for the lay catechists in almost all the dioceses. But most of them are not well organized. So, after attending these training programmes the participants may not be happy. Therefore the parish priests may not show any interest in sending others to attend these training programmes.