

**THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY  
JUSTICE SUNDAY - 17 AUGUST 2008**

*'Heed the voice of God in the crises of Women'*



Dear Brothers and Sisters,  
Greetings of Peace to you!

On behalf of the Commission for Justice Peace and Development, I am happy to present to you the Justice Sunday message for this year, on the empowerment of women in the church and in society.

Everyday, we come across instances of domestic and societal violence on young girls and women. Depending on the regions, eve-teasing, female foeticide, infanticide, rape, molestation, kidnapping, abduction, battering, dowry deaths, stove-bursting, trafficking for sex and slavery take place even today. This situation has worsened today due to the media, which uses female bodies as marketing tools. Women face economic exploitation and sexual harassment both in their work places and in their own houses. There are many cases of torture, which finally end up with women committing suicide or being killed.

However, women today are politically-motivated, economically-oriented, and socially becoming more aware of the great injustices done to them. Hence, it is urgent and imperative that the Church keep pace with this awareness and work towards acknowledging the rightful place of women in its mission. Jesus responded to the many women of his time who were helpless and hopeless, who were marginalized and subjected to discrimination and violence in violation of their dignity. May the observance of this Justice Sunday help us to heed the voice of God in the cries of women! And together with women, may we restore what was originally intended for all of humanity: equality and dignity! It is not only men but also women that have been created in God's image and declared to be 'very good'.

Please use the liturgical guidelines and make the day memorable and effective through Interreligious meetings, peace marches, public discussions and action plans on the empowerment of women in the Church and in society.

May our Mother Mary, the feminine Genius, guide us in our endeavour towards dignity and empowerment of women in the Church and in society!

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Yvon Ambroise,  
Chairperson, CBCI Commission for Justice, Peace and Development

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY<sup>1</sup></b> <b>JUSTICE SUNDAY - 17 AUGUST 2008</b></p>
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**Introduction**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today the church in India observes JUSTICE SUNDAY. The theme of the day is: *Empowerment of women in Church and society*. By virtue of their creation in the image of God, both men and women have equal rights. Empowerment of women may be an issue concerning women; but it is the responsibility of whole humanity. It is about getting a better world for everybody.

This year the Universal Church celebrates the 20th anniversary of the Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, on the Dignity of Women. In connection with this, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India that gathered in Jamsedpur in February, 2008 reflected on the theme '**Empowerment of Women in Church and Society**'.

The Vatican II Document *Gaudium et Spes* acknowledged that, "Every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, colour, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent". Our Holy Father Benedict XVI has put it rightly: "*There are certain places and cultures where woman is discriminated against and undervalued just for the fact that she is a woman.*" In 1992, the CBCI General Assembly stated: "With a sense of sorrow we must admit that women feel discriminated against, even in the Church".

**Penitential Rite**

Woman: We have much to confess Lord! Many a time we remain silent due to shame and humiliation. We are also responsible for victimizing women, selling girl children, treating them as second class citizens and allowing ourselves to remain silent and to be silenced in society and the Church. *Lord, have mercy!*

Man: We feel sorry Lord for the times we have treated women as commodities to be bought and sold. Instead of reducing their house-hold burdens, we have exploited them and extracted too much work from them. We confess, Lord, our sins of domestic violence and physical, emotional, sexual and spiritual harassment. *Christ, have mercy!*

Woman: We admit in anguish that we, men and women, have not treated each other as equally made in your image and likeness. We failed to respect each other's dignity. Thus we abused each other and remained victims of our cultural and traditional values. *Lord, have mercy!*

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## **Opening prayer**

### Celebrant:

*God of love, we thank you for having created us, male and female, in your image and likeness. As your children, we are equal in our dignity and worth. In this Justice Sunday, as we focus our attention on empowerment of women, enable us to shed all our discriminatory behaviours and attitudes to women. Help us, God, to recognize their worth and dignity and to take them as equal partners in building your Kingdom in the hearts of your people and eventually on earth. We make this prayer through Christ your Son. Amen.*

### **Liturgy of the Word**

**Introduction to the First Reading:** The liberation struggle of the People of God in Egypt was initiated by God through five women: The Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, the mother and sister of Moses who trigger a chain reaction and the daughter of Pharaoh. It is through their assistance that Moses, called by God, stays alive and comes into the picture later. If they had not been God-fearing and courageous women and if they had not dared to defy the King, the liberation history would have been different. Let us listen to this reading attentively and appreciate the courageous role played by women in the history of salvation.

**First Reading: Book of Exodus: 1: 8-22**

**Introduction to the Second Reading:** The second reading contains names of some of the women who formed part of the missionary team of the early Church. The name Priscilla (Prisca) is found in four books of the NT. Surprisingly out of the six places where the names of Priscilla and her husband Aquila are mentioned, Priscilla's name comes first in four. There were also several other women who were in positions of leadership in the early Church like Phoebe – a deaconess and another couple-missionary – Andronicus and Junia whom Paul describes as “outstanding among the apostles”. Priscilla was well-versed in theology and Christian doctrine. Priscilla's contribution to the church as a teacher of theology, a leader, and a missionary as the active ministerial team-mate of Paul with Aquila raises the question as to why we have so few 21<sup>st</sup> century 'Priscillas' and Aquilas'? Let us listen to the reading.

**Second Reading: Rom: 16: 1-7**

**Gospel Reading: John: 4: 21-30**

### **Outlines for Homily**

#### **Fact-file:**

- ◆ Our Constitution guarantees equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters related to employment and appointment to any office (Art.16:1).
- ◆ Discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, and residence is forbidden. (Art.16.2).
- ◆ Though our Constitution and laws guarantee men-women equality, still women's oppression continues unabated from womb to tomb, from cradle to coffin. Women remain the victims of grave discrimination in Indian society.

- ◆ A strong preference for male children and heavy dowry demanded from bride's family has led to rampant sex-selection abortion in recent years and has resulted in the disproportionate sex ratio of the population in the age group 0-6 years (1000 boys to 927 girls, declining from 945 in 1991 and 962 in 1981 as per 2001 Census).
- ◆ The process of globalization which is market-centred and profit-driven is leading to further exploitation of women as cheap labour resulting in the increasing pauperization of women.
- ◆ Throughout history and the contemporary world, the religious belief that men and women are fully and equally human has led men and women to dedicate their lives to transforming social and religious structures to be more egalitarian.

#### Quotes

- ◆ When it comes to setting women free from every kind of exploitation and domination, the Gospel contains an ever relevant message which goes back to the *attitude of Jesus Christ himself*. Transcending the established norms of his own culture, Jesus treated women with openness, respect, acceptance and tenderness. In this way he honoured the dignity which women have always possessed according to God's plan and in his love. - *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women, 3*
- ◆ If anyone has this task of advancing the dignity of women in the Church and society, it is women themselves who must recognize their responsibility as leading characters. There is still much effort to be done, in many parts of the world and in various surroundings, to destroy that unjust and deleterious mentality which considers the human being as a thing, as an object to buy and sell, as an instrument for selfish interests or for pleasure only. - *Pope John Paul II, Christifideles Laici, 49*
- ◆ "Dowry deaths, female foeticides, domestic violence and sexual discrimination have to end and practical steps are needed to raise women to their rightful place in society." – *Cardinal Varkey Vithayathil, President of the CBCI*
- ◆ Fundamentalism and communalism reinforce the subjugation of women to men, suppress women's movements by dividing women along religious lines and intensify violence against women. – *CBCI General Assembly 2008*
- ◆ The Committee is deeply concerned that, in spite of the commendable efforts by the State party in promoting equality of men and women..., widespread gender inequalities, cultural stereotypes and personal laws of minority groups continue to prevail, affecting negatively the equal enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights by women. – *Concluding Observations of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on India, May 2008, No. 16*

#### Points to ponder

- ◆ In the days when Jewish men were not supposed to talk to other women than their wives in public, Jesus' longest recorded conversation, which was a theological discourse, in the Bible with any individual was in a public setting with the Samaritan woman who apparently had multiple affairs with men. For Jesus to have dealings with this woman was to risk ritual defilement. Thus Jesus broke the Jewish tradition which considered the Samaritans as impure and which denied educational and Scriptural training to women as they were not considered intelligent enough to benefit from such training.

- ◆ The Samaritan woman was the first person to whom Jesus revealed himself as Messiah in the Gospel of John, and this is the first “*I am*” statement in the gospel as well.
- ◆ Jesus engaged the Samaritan woman in an intensive spiritual formation telling her that true worshippers must worship the Father in spirit and truth, because God is spirit. Such worship engages the mind, emotions and body, but it is centred deeper, in the spirit. And to worship *in truth* could mean to worship as who one really is, with no hypocrisy, falseness, deception.
- ◆ The spiritual formation Jesus imparted to her was transformative and liberative! She ‘left her water jar’ immediately. She could not be confined to merely performing customary chores of women! She has been empowered to bear testimony to Jesus and to preach her evangelistic sermon to her fellowmen. Though we do not even know her name, *she was the first one on record to lead a large number of people to Jesus!*

**Prayer of the Faithfull**

**Response: God of compassion, empower us to live a life of dignity!**

- ◆ That the leaders of our universal and local Church as well as our socio-political leaders may realise their duty to remove all forms of discrimination against Women in the Church and in society, we pray to you, O God!
- ◆ That all of us may work together continually to promote the rights of women and recognize their equality as your children, we pray to you, O God!
- ◆ That we may be so enlightened as to appreciate the dignity and worth of the female foetuses and infants and to refrain from killing them because of their gender, we pray to you, O God!
- ◆ That we may uphold the dignity of women everywhere and especially of those women living in our own families and workplaces and shun inflicting any form of violence on them, we pray to you, O God!
- ◆ That we may be strengthened to by your Spirit to spurn dowry, we pray to you, O God!
- ◆ That we may imbibe the spirit of your Son, Jesus, and shed our patriarchal myths and cultural stereotypes and work for an egalitarian society, we pray to you, O God!
- ◆ That we may encourage the education of our girl-children and that all the educational institutions of the Church may preferentially promote education of the economically deprived and socially marginalized girl children and thus ensure the empowerment of those children, we pray to you, O God!

*(Let us pray for our personal intentions.)*

**Celebrant:** God, you are our loving Father and Mother and we, men and women are your children, equal in your sight. Help us to create a just world where men and women are treated with equal respect and given equal opportunities. We make this prayer through Jesus Christ your Son. Amen.

**Post Communion Prayer**

Loving God, our Father and Mother, you hear the cries of your suffering people. Enable us to be your hands and heart for those who are in pain. Give us the courage and wisdom to speak out for justice and righteousness. Like your Son Jesus, may we do whatever is possible to empower our women so that the emergence of your Kingdom may be expedited! We make this prayer through Christ our Lord, Amen.

# Ten Commandments FOR THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN



1. Accord to every woman equal respect as to men!
2. Spurn all kinds of violence against women! Desist from and prevent foeticide or infanticide!
3. Stand up against the discrimination and violence against women!
4. Spurn dowry!
5. Invest in women's education, formation and empowerment! Encourage and enable their participation in the decision-making process in the family and other places!
6. Take an affirmative stand on gender justice
7. Work for the uplift of the tribal, dalit and disadvantaged women and ensure opportunities for employment in Church institutions.

8. Demand/Offer at least 35% (moving towards an ideal of 50%) representation of women as office-bearers and members not only in the Panchayats, Legislative Assemblies and in the Parliament but also in the ecclesial bodies at the local and national levels.
9. Affirm and recognize the pastoral work and ministries of women – lay and religious – as catechists, lectors, and animators of Basic/Small Christian Communities, counsellors, liturgists and community workers.
10. Take concerted efforts to address the needs of migrants and domestic workers, and keep fighting against the trafficking of women and children.

**For further assistance**

- ◆ Call Women's Help Line: 1091
- ◆ Register your complaint online: <http://ncw.nic.in/ncwcomplaint/complaintentry.asp>
- ◆ Contact the Diocesan Commission for women.
- ◆ Contact the office for Social Advocacy, at CBCI Tel: 011-23366127, Email: <hotlinedelhi@gmail.com>

(These commandments are derived from the CBCI General Body Statement of 2008)

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