



Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies

ISSN: P-0972-3331 E-2582-8711

Vol 21/1-2 Jan-June 2022 **75-97**

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5722123

Stable URL:

<https://www.doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5722123>

Fratelli Tutti: A Feminist Biblical-Theological Appraisal

Pauline Chakkalikal, DSP

Daughters of St Paul, Bandra West, Mumbai 400050

Abstract: With immense gratitude to God for the person, vision and mission of Pope Francis who titled his Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* (FT) after the example of St. Francis of Assisi, my paper makes a modest attempt to unearth the significance of FT.

True to the title of the paper, it must be said that, in the light of today's post-Vatican thinking and women's movements, the traditional understanding of the Bible needs to be reviewed and reinterpreted. The Bible, regarded as synonymous with the Word of God, is liberative and empowering. However, it comes to us mediated by human beings, languages and thought patterns conditioned by their particular age and culture. Hence, we should

Cite as: Chakkalikal, Pauline (2022). *Fratelli Tutti: A Feminist Biblical-Theological Appraisal* (Version 1.0). *Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies*, Jan-June 2022(26/1-2), **75-97**.
<http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5722123>

not allow to be victimised by the androcentric and sexist elements in biblical texts. A holistic approach to biblical and theological studies ought to be developed, keeping in mind the emergence of feminist liberation hermeneutics and theology.

Keywords: *Fratelli Tutti*, Feminist Hermeneutics, Feminist Theology, Women in the Bible

Introduction

In response to the request of the editor of *Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies* to write an article on Pope Francis' *Fratelli Tutti* (FT) from women's perspective, my paper makes a modest attempt to explore the richness of Pope Francis' encyclical letter on 'Fraternity and Social Friendship' as stated in the title, and share my views as a woman committed to balanced feminist ideologies, hermeneutics and theology.

Situating the study in the lived experiences of women, who form part of the patriarchal society and church, calls us to challenge the discrepancy between the idealized concept of women and their real life situation. On the one hand, women are exalted and praised; on the other they are subjugated and side-lined. Despite the Goddess worship in our temples and shrines, Marian veneration in our churches and grottos, and the assurance of equal opportunities guaranteed by the Indian Constitution, as well as by the empowering declarations of the official documents of Vatican II (e.g., *GS/29*, 8, 9, 60; *AA/9*), women are still struggling to find their own space to redefine their identities and roles. Set within this paradoxical context, we shall reflect on FT the third encyclical letter of Pope Francis. Although used liberally, the terms 'feminist', 'feminist hermeneutics and theology' need clarification.

Feminist is a person who believes in and supports feminism, especially one who actively campaigns to achieve change. Feminism may be described as a theory and movement capable of challenging patriarchal structures which keep women subjugated, and at the same time providing alternatives for a just society. It does not mean a rejection of men or a replacing of male power with female power. On the contrary, its emphasis is on enhancing shared responsibility, partnership and trust, inclusive decision-making with an inclusionary authority structure. It connotes a genuine commitment to realizing the full equality of women with men in the possession and exercise of human dignity and rights (Gen 1:26-27). Feminists see power as empowerment of self, not control over others; power is exercised as power *with* and not power *over*. Feminism in its broadest sweep is a humanistic concern; it is about liberation (Raj 1984 & Coll 1994). Unfortunately, feminism has been projected as a ‘Western’ phenomenon by traditionalists and Leftists alike, though for different reasons (Jayawardena & Kelkar 1989). Far from denying the God-given biological differences between the sexes, feminists acknowledge, accept and celebrate them.

Feminist Hermeneutics and Theology share the concerns of feminism. For centuries theology has been the ‘privileged possession’ of clerics. Consequently, Christian theology has side-tracked the experiences of the oppressed, particularly of women. Feminist theology presents a radical critique of religious and theological thinking stuck in patriarchal moorings. It provides a clear paradigmatic shift in biblical interpretations. It makes one realize that a religion developed out of partial experience cannot respond adequately to the needs of full humanity. A theology that perceives God, humankind and the world through solely masculine experience is obviously defective and incomplete. Feminist theology envisions a new community based upon the values of mutuality, reciprocity and inclusiveness. Underlining the experience-based and struggle-centred nature of feminist hermeneutics, Pearl Drego says, ‘Women’s lives are the ‘text’ for interpretation and elucidation’ (Drego 2010: 232-252).

Aware of the fact that the Bible and its interpretations have been embedded in a patriarchal culture, religion and society, feminist scholars – women and men alike – have underlined the need for reading the biblical texts from feminist perspectives. Written from the socio-cultural perspective of male authors, the Bible – God’s Word in human language – has legitimized women’s subordination in Christian tradition. Therefore, a hermeneutics of suspicion should inform any reading of biblical texts and commentaries, and reconstruct them in terms of praxis for liberation of all. In the words of Schüssler Fiorenza, a leading New Testament feminist scholar, a hermeneutics of suspicion challenges androcentric texts and interpretations ‘as ideological articulations of men expressing, as well as maintaining patriarchal historical conditions’ (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983: 60). As all theological articulations are based on a particular understanding of the Bible, feminist scholars emphasize the need to scrutinize the androcentric and patriarchal/*kyriarchal* elements in biblical texts and retrieve the position of women and their partnership with God in the story of salvation. It is rightly said: ‘the hermeneutical principles that we choose to employ are determined by our theological stands operative in exegesis and interpretation’ (Melanchthon 1998: 281).

Divided into two main parts, **Part 1** of this paper deals with the Encyclical of the Pope and explores its God-centred and people-oriented approach. While highlighting the concerns of Pope Francis, and the values proclaimed in the encyclical and issues raised therein, we shall make a critique of the ground reality at different levels, with special reference to women.

Part 2 delves into feminist reading of relevant biblical texts, in particular the all-embracing, all-inclusive vision and praxis of Jesus of Nazareth, as well as Paul’s liberative and unitive vision of equality and oneness of all in Christ Jesus

(Gal 3:26-28). It also takes up one of the main concerns frequently voiced by the Pope, namely interreligious harmony for world peace.

1. Exploring the Wealth of Fratelli Tutti

a. Highlighting Pope Francis' Oft-Repeated Concerns

FT, the third encyclical of Pope Francis speaks volumes about his concern for 'Fraternity and Social Friendship' as highlighted on the cover of the book. Inspired by St. Francis of Assisi, it is rightly called a Franciscan encyclical letter. In the words of Pope Francis, 'St. Francis who inspired me to write the Encyclical *Laudato Si*, prompts me once more to devote this new Encyclical to fraternity and social friendship' (Francis 2020. Henceforth FT). The very choice of his name 'Francis' reveals the Pope's admiration for St. Francis of Assisi who with his words FT addressed his brothers and sisters and proposed to them a way of life marked by the flavour of the Gospel (FT 1).

In his scholarly editorial, Suresh Mathew has culled the relevance of FT. Calling it 'a ground-breaking encyclical', he has unearthed its salient features (Mathew 2020: 3). Written in eight chapters, this new encyclical becomes 'the road map for a new world'. Religious fundamentalism, majority-minority feelings, the unending violence against women contributing to their physical, sexual and emotional subjection, selfish notion of development at the expense of the other are among several crucial points underlined in the encyclical.

Along the same lines Mathew Paikada's well-researched article provides informative and educative detailed analysis of FT (Paikada 2020: 6-11). He too underscores the influence of St. Francis of Assisi on Pope Francis. According to his findings, FT 'continues programmatically the main focus of the ministry of Pope Francis'. Among his favourite themes, the following deserve our special attention:

- Earth, the common home for entire humanity

- Interreligious harmony and cooperation for world peace and progress
- Build-up of friendly, brotherly/sisterly relationship beyond boundaries, in the spirit of humility (FT 3). The parable of the Good Samaritan is an excellent example (FT 68).¹
- Problems of injustice caused by various factors such as induced poverty, racism, migration, etc. (FT 28-55)
- Pope's determination expressed in NO to just war and death penalty

It is remarkable that Pope Francis' simplicity prompted him to insert into the encyclical the common appeal made by the Pope and the Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyeb in 2019 (FT 285). Similarly, the Pontiff's humility to acknowledge the influence of great saints and sages on his life is admirable, despite the absence of any woman saint on the list.

Human rights and peace activist-cum-writer Cedric Prakash (2020: 12-16) calls FT a 'path-breaking' encyclical that presents Pope Francis' passionate call for a meaningful and all-embracing discipleship, an invitation addressed to 'brothers and sisters all' (FT 8). The Pope's emphasis on brotherhood and sisterhood between men and women is praiseworthy. His concern for dialogue as a means of fostering/nurturing justice, dialogue as a means of mutual encounter (FT 198), dignity of every human being and the right of every person to live with dignity and to develop integrally (FT 107) are among other relevant issues raised in the FT. The Pope condemns every desire for dominance and destruction (FT 249), rules out the ideology justifying the

¹ On Good Samaritan, see Chakkalakal 2020: 327-349. It was originally an endowment lecture delivered at Vidyajyoti, Delhi. I am grateful to Ms. Jean Saldanha for final editing of my paper and Melody for typing and technical assistance.

rational of a ‘just war’ (FT 258), and rejects the death penalty (FT 263).

Trainer and consultant to non-profit organisations and closely associated with Universal Solidarity Movement, Jacob Peenikaparambil considers FT as a means to ‘Build Fraternity’ (Peenikaparambil 2020: 17-19). In his view FT promotes respect for different religions together with religious diversity as a means for building a just society based on the values enshrined in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution and the teaching of Vatican II in *Nostra Aetate*. In his research, Peenikaparambil underscores the Pope’s emphasis on the relationship between religions and politics. It is noteworthy that the document states clearly ‘religious ministers must not engage in party politics that are the proper domain of the laity’ (FT 276). Peenikaparambil offers a practical suggestion, to exhibit the Preamble of the Indian Constitution in a prominent place in all parishes and Catholic institutions. He also proposes the dissemination of the same through all ministries of the Church. He sees the relevance of Pope Francis’ exhortation to the Catholic Church to sow seeds of peace and compassion in the context of hateful feelings and dividing factors perpetuated by those in power structures on the basis of religion. He has also highlighted Pope Francis’ anxiety ‘to offer common witness to the love of God for all people by working together in the service of humanity.’ FT 281-285 deal with the issue of religion and violence.

Prakash Louis, former Director of Indian Social Institute, New Delhi and Bengaluru, known for his multi-faceted talents (action researcher, writer, activist and animator) finds in FT a shared inheritance for all (Louis 2020: 20-21). He draws our attention to the fact that the encyclical was published at the tomb of St. Francis of Assisi on 3 October 2020. He picks up two interrelated themes running through the encyclical that are central to the Gospel and to all religions, thereby establishing the brother-sister relationship of all human beings. He emphatically states, ‘To be human is to be inter-human, to be human is to be interdependent

and to be human is to be with and for other selves and in that find oneself.’ In the same breadth he speaks about Indian Christian commitment to FT wherein he underscores the need to be intercultural, interreligious and interconnected, transcending humanly erected barriers and promoting brotherly-sisterly love.

One of the most prominent professors of Missiology Jacob Kavunkal considers FT as an encyclical that ‘unfolds the Kingdom prayer...’ (Kavunkal 2021: 6-9). Underlining the essence of brotherly-sisterly society, he acknowledges the importance of basing it on the Fatherhood and Motherhood of God. Contemplating FT from various angles, Kavunkal picks up many issues close to the Pope’s heart that find expression in FT 3 (all-inclusive love of God); FT 5 (equality in rights, duties and dignity of human beings); FT 6 (universal scope of sisterly-brotherly love, friendship through dialogue with all people of good will). He places on record the Pontiff’s ongoing discussion on the inequality experienced by different groups particularly women, guest workers, children, migrant workers (FT 37) and others.

b. Critique of the Ground Reality with Special Reference to Women

In a commentary by Marcus Mescher (2021), associate professor of Christian ethics, on *Fratelli Tutti*, the author critiques the gendered term ‘fraternity’ and reliance on exclusively male sources and examples. While the Pope encourages us to recognize social problems as spiritual problems, he fails to address its ‘inadequate approaches to the religious and moral formation that contribute to these spiritual problems’. Mescher also critiques the institutionalized churches’ mistreatment of LGBTQ persons, marginalization of women, white supremacy, hypocrisy and corruption that bear a counter witness to Jesus’ teaching and healing ministry oriented towards inclusion and mercy. He

asserts that *Fratelli Tutti* emphasizes that ‘love is social and political’. He underscores the importance of mutual respect, equality and reciprocal concern as a means to build good relationships among people within the Church and society.

Theckanath, reflecting on the Indian Christian community in the context of the pandemic points out how the Church missed the opportunity for frontline leadership and collective action. He proposes a few points relevant to the Church in India in the current socio-economic and political context: the authoritarianism exhibited by nations and governments prohibiting the rights of the people to voice their opinion, to dissent and to organize. In this regard, he exhorts the Church leadership to stand up ‘to speak truth to those in power, even if it means that the institutional power of the Church will be decimated’ (Theckanath 2020: 22-23). His observation regarding sharing of power with women is very pertinent: the title of the encyclical excludes women. He too acknowledges the absence of women saints and sages mentioned by the Pope in FT.

2. Reviewing Some Biblical Texts

a. The all-embracing, all-inclusive vision and praxis of Jesus, our Prophet-Liberator

Women in Jesus’ Movement

Jesus is presented as accepting women and their partnership in his ministry in an astonishing manner which contrasts with his Jewish contemporaries.² Against the background of first century patriarchal culture, Jesus’ behaviour towards women is so extraordinary that New Testament scholar Moule cites it as evidence of scriptural authenticity: ‘The Gospel portrait of Jesus would seem to have fairly forced its way through an atmosphere

² It is said that a pious Jew thanked God daily for not having been born a Gentile, a woman or a slave. See ET in A. L. Williams, ed., *Tractate Berakoth: Mishna and Tosephta* (London: SPCK, 1921), p.84. For Schussler Fiorenza’s comments on this, see *In Memory of Her*, p.217 f.

still... alien to it and still scarcely comprehending' (Moule 1967: 65 & Sayers 1971). His positive attitude to women disciples enhanced their leadership functions at different levels in the Jesus' movement.

Women Who Followed Jesus (Luke 8:1-3)

This pericope provides the following information (Ricci 1994: 31-32).

- More than one phrase goes with a single theme: there are two referring to Jesus' healing activity and two detailing the composition of the group and identifying the women.
- The first two, *travelling and evangelising* (8:1) have Jesus as their subject, and are linked to the group theme. The link is established 'in that they are placed in a context of shared resources and in that the circle around Jesus were the first to hear the good news' (Ricci 1994: 52).
- The *healing and freeing of those possessed* has a direct dependence on the women members of the group theme.
- Besides three whose names have been mentioned (Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna), there are many unnamed women.
- The action of *providing* (v.3) indicates the relationship between the women, as subjects, and Jesus as the object.

Thus the whole passage revolves around the group theme. The group is composed of Jesus, the Twelve and the women. They are constantly with him. This is consonant with Luke 23:49, 55 and with the other Synoptics (cf. Mt 27:55; Mk 15:40) which indicate the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee. In fact, Luke 8:1-3 explicitly puts the women on the same footing as the apostles by stating that the Twelve went with him, as well as certain women who also looked after the material needs of Jesus and his team. The Greek word used here is *diakoneo*, usually rendered 'minister', and

'*diakonia* expresses leadership exercised at the common meal including the celebration of the Eucharist' (Seim 1994: 743). As Francis Pereira elucidates, in the whole work of Luke the word *diakoneo* occurs nine times (Lk 4:39; 8:3; 12:37; 17:8; 22:26,27; Acts 6:2; 19:22; Pereira 2000: 161). A similar group of women is mentioned by Mark and Matthew in their passion narrative (Mk 15:40; Mt 27:55). The word used here for 'follow' is *akolouthein*, the one regularly used in the Gospels for discipleship in the fullest sense (e.g., Mk 2:14; Mt 8:19-22).

Women in Mission

The word 'mission' so frequently used today has different connotations. In its immediate meaning of 'sending', the word reveals deep theological notions.³ It is rooted in the intimate life of the Triune God. There is the action of sending: God sends Jesus; Jesus sends the apostles (Jn 20:21) and the church sends missionaries. There is also the accomplishment of the task entrusted to the envoy. The missionary, then, is one who is *sent* to fulfil a particular function of the person who sends him/her. Thus the women disciples of Jesus are missionaries in the true sense of the word. The Gospels provide ample evidence of the missionary dynamism of women that takes them from the foot of the cross to the tomb and beyond.

Whatever be the prejudice against the women disciples, the fact is that they were the first to hear the news: 'He is risen'! Although culturally women's testimony had no legal standing, Jesus acted counter-culturally when he made women's witness as the bedrock of Christian faith (cf. 1 Cor 15:7). Not only Mary Magdalene, but also the women witnesses of the resurrection deserve the title apostles. Jesus commissioned them as a group (Mt 28:10): 'Go tell.' Indeed, the women who figure in the resurrection stories are models of true discipleship. In her meticulously researched book,

³ In its radical sense, the word 'mission' has come to be understood as a 'defining characteristic' of what it means to be a Christian. See Mattam and Kim 1995.

Virginia R Sandiyagu portrays women as eyewitnesses to the Christian *Kerygma* (Sandiyagu 2017).

b. Apostle Paul's Liberative and Unitive Vision in Gal 3:26-28

Paul's letters have had tremendous impact on Christian thinkers and reformers of all ages and cultures down the centuries. However, Paul of Tarsus continues to be a controversial figure in feminist circles. He has been labelled a male chauvinist or anti-feminist because of his alleged denigration of the role and status of women (e.g., 1Cor 11:2-16; 1Cor 14:26-40). In fact, Pauline literature in the New Testament 'has formed the battleground upon which women's issues in the Church have been contested' (Byrne 1988: xiii).

Women will no longer tolerate the indiscriminate use of Pauline writings and other biblical texts in order to perpetuate female domestication in the church and society. They have begun to challenge the dynamics of oppression in the name of God and religion. The awakening of the 'feminist' consciousness is a sign of the times that needs to be interpreted in the wider context of the people's movements. As Pope John XXIII rightly remarked, 'Since women are becoming ever more conscious of their dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments, but will demand rights befitting a human person both in domestic and in public life' (John XXIII 1978: 44/71).

It is beyond the scope of this article to do a detailed analysis and exegetical study of Gal 3:26-28. Paul's phrase 'no male and female' points to the quality of the 'new creation in Christ' (Gal 5:6; Col 3:10). This new creation in Christ brings about the 'oneness' of all believers in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28d). The original equality and unity of male and female (Gen 1:27) destroyed by sin (Gen 3) is restored in Christ who is the image (εἰκών) of the invisible God, the first born of all

creation (Col 1:15). The male-female relationship which has become one of subordination and domination can no longer be maintained in Christ.

From a feminist perspective, ‘the implications of Gal 3:28 for gender roles and status are momentous’, especially considering its impact on the community, effected by ‘the abolition of the three sets of hierarchical relations’ (Briggs 1983: .219). Male privileges, whether legal-societal or cultural-religious were no longer valid for Christians. Challenging the religious male prerogatives within the Christian community on the basis of Paul’s egalitarian vision, Schussler Fiorenza has remarked: ‘In so far as this egalitarian Christian self-understanding did away with all male privileges of religion, class and caste, it allowed not only gentiles and slaves but also women to exercise leadership functions within the missionary movement’ (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:218).

Reflecting from an Indian context, with its culture predominantly rooted in Hindu ethos, deeply entrenched in the caste system, Paul’s message sounds prophetic. Against the backdrop of a patriarchal mindset with its preference for sons, sex-gender stereotypes and atrocities against women, Paul’s egalitarian vision paves the way for the creation of a society built on the principles of human dignity, equality, liberty and partnership.

All too often Pauline texts on women have been locked out of their contexts, and applied to totally different situations, or to issues, which lie beyond their concern. It is amazing to note how Pauline authority has been invoked in favour of female domestication in the churches through the centuries. Reading Paul out of his specific context, patriarchal patterns from dominant culture obscured Paul’s view of equality and oneness of all in Christ (Gal 3:28). Consequently, ‘submission, silence and subordination became watchwords for Christian women....’ (Thomson 1986: 151). This has not only deteriorated women’s position but also contributed to the development of patriarchal

theology as exemplified in the teachings of the prominent Christian thinkers in the patristic era (See Chakkalalal 2004).

c. Inter-religious Harmony and Cooperation for World Peace and Progress

Religious pluralism being a fact of history, religious belongingness should not be an obstacle to harmonious living and interfaith partnership. For a multi-religious and pluricultural country like India/Asia, interreligious dialogue is a living reality; it is not a luxury but a necessity, particularly in the present socio-economic, religio-cultural and political context of Asian countries. Followers of different religious traditions should be encouraged to work with all people of goodwill in furthering the Reign/Kingdom of God.

Today Pope Francis, the leader of more than 1.2 billion Catholics across the globe, remains an icon of interfaith dialogue and relationship. His exhortation to the people of Bosnia during his visit in 2015 is relevant to our own context: ‘In a world unfortunately rent by conflicts, this land can become a message: attesting that it is possible to live together side by side, in diversity but rooted in common humanity’ (Cited in Peenikaparambil 2015: 19-22). Together with other world religious leaders who exhort all people ‘irrespective of gender, faith and culture’ to network for peace and justice, Pope Francis paves the way for transcending ‘the narrow identities of religion and dogma’, thereby placing the accent on ‘higher identities of the common humanity and divine presence in every human being’ (Cited in Peenikaparambil 2015: 22)

Describing religion as ‘a divine-human relationship,’ Amaladoss accentuates the need for learning from other religions: ‘...what I am suggesting is that each religion, while believing in its specificity and uniqueness, can – and does – accept the legitimacy of other religions as facilitating divine-human encounter. Each religion will explain this in

accordance with its own faith-vision' (Amaladoss 2003: 138). Critiquing the people who brand pluralistic approach as 'relativization strategy', Pathrapankal stresses: 'It is to be forcefully maintained that when we speak of pluralistic approach, it is not a relativization of one's own faith in Christ that is proposed, but rather an objective approach to the reality of religions in God's plan of salvation.'⁴

A more creative form of dialogue is expressed as united action for a common cause in society, such as the eradication of social evils. All religions should unite in the fight against poverty, illiteracy, child labour, psychological and sexual assault on women, exploitation of Dalits even to the extent of dehumanizing practices, communalism, environmental destruction and whatever. The negative role of religions as witnessed in contemporary India does not negate the positive role religions can play in building a better nation, a better world.

My interfaith journey: Examples of interfaith partnership abound in our country; dialogue initiatives at various levels have been carried out by many centres throughout India (Painadath 2007). At this juncture, it would be good to provide some useful information about my own contribution to interfaith ministry. I

⁴ Pathrapankal, 2001: 140. A word about cultural expressions of the Christian faith is in place here. A Church in dialogue with followers of other religions is called to express its faith in and through local cultures which are liberating and empowering. Although the Council documents recognise the legitimacy of plurality of cultural expression in the Church (*LG* 13; *GS* 58; *AG* 9), the Indian Church (all denominations) leaders and pastors and post-Vatican II theologians, including liturgy experts, by and large (I am aware of the few exceptions.) still cling to a Western form of Christianity as seen in the architecture of our churches, the atmosphere of worship, postures, gestures, signs, symbols, vestments of priests, music, prayer forms, etc. Consequently, a majority of the laity too follow an imported spirituality, liturgy, and style of mission, which do not appeal or cater to the needs of the oppressed and exploited section of the Church. Many have uncritically accepted the Western form of Christianity as normative and universal.

ventured into the interreligious movement after violence hit the western Indian city of Mumbai (then known as Bombay) during December 1992 and January 1993. As per reports, the riots claimed about 900 lives. The violence was Muslim retaliation against the demolition of an ancient mosque in the northern Indian city of Ayodhya by right-wing Hindu groups.

In the aftermath of the riots, together with one of our sisters, I visited people of all faiths in our immediate neighbourhood for their response to a proposed interfaith get-together. From its inception that year, the gathering has attracted people of all religions and walks of life in the area. What began as an ‘All-Religion Prayer and Get-Together’ 27 years ago with less than a 100 people, has grown to a crowd of more than 600 youth and adults over the years. A special feature of this yearly programme aimed at celebrating Unity in Diversity, is its focus on the selected theme for the year, keeping in mind its contemporary relevance. Another speciality is youth participation by way of innovative presentations based on the theme.

My experience of promoting unity in diversity and harmony among various religious communities has deepened my conviction that followers of other religions are not mere objects of our theological discourse, but partners in our common search for Truth. What is important is the quality of our involvement, the humility to work with and not merely for people. Reflecting on the ‘plurireligious Indian context’, Mangai, the editor of *VJTR* views ‘dialogue at the service of human promotion’ (Mangar 2021: 234-238).

3. The Way Forward: Challenges and Proposals

Despite Pope Francis’ earnest desire to give women their rightful space, the Church structure is not conducive to

translate the Gospel ideals declared in FT. It is evident that in the existing patriarchal framework, with its clergy-centred leadership, women and the 'laity' in general are at the bottom of the church hierarchy. Moreover, the clerical structures reinforce structures of hierarchy and domination, and simultaneously prohibit women from policy formation in the Church. The exclusion of women from positions of decision-making deprives them of their effective role in shaping the Church's mission, its theology, its doctrines, its biblical interpretations, its liturgy, its spirituality and its laws. In her well-researched article, Bincy George pinpoints the inconsistency between the words and deeds of Church leadership with regard to women (George 2021: 70-88).

The institutional church that claims to champion the cause of human rights including women's empowerment in all aspects (*GS* 29,8,9,60) would do well to retrieve the teachings and praxis of Jesus who envisaged his community as a circle of friends (*Jn* 15:12-16), a discipleship of equals (*Mt* 23:2-10; *Gal* 3:26-28) and allow women's potential to enliven and rejuvenate its existence. At this juncture, it is worth pondering the words of Pope Francis who, while acknowledging women's share in pastoral responsibilities and contributions to theological reflection, 'demands that the legitimate rights of women be respected, based on the firm conviction that men and women are equal in dignity....' (Francis 2013: 84. See also Soares-Prabhu 1985).

It is time that the entire Christian community acknowledged that the church has been impoverished because the faithful are deprived of feminine and feminist insights and perspectives at various levels. Church leaders should call into question the contradictions between the theological interpretations of ministry as service, and the practices of clerical privilege and exclusion. The church leadership is called to recapture the original vision and praxis of Jesus and move towards the realization of a community of 'discipleship of equals' (*Mt* 23:9-10; cf. *Gal* 3:26-28). The differentiation of the role of sexes in keeping with the

socio-cultural perceptions of male-centred societies has been contingent on a given historical situation; one cannot deduce from it a divine, immutable model that would apply to other different circumstances.

Women's Commitment: Women of all Christian denominations have a specific contribution to make in liberating the structures of the church from the constraints of patriarchal ideology and theology operative in ministry, liturgy and leadership. We can no longer afford to remain the silent and silenced half in the Church. Rooted in Jesus Christ and energized by the Spirit, we can overcome hurdles of every kind and become agents of individual, social and structural transformation. Like our forefathers/foremothers in the faith, today we shall function as powerful witnesses and spokespersons of God's liberative action in favour of the voiceless, faceless and marginalized, including the exploited children and mother earth.⁵ Discipleship demands a preferential option for the poor: "A religion that does not challenge us and disturb us in our dealings with the poor is not religion" (Joachim 2019).

An egalitarian society or church is possible only with the cooperation of both women and men, committed to social justice and Gospel values. Through our ministry of writing, teaching, conducting animation sessions, and interacting with women at the grassroots by organizing various community development programmes, we shall strive to ensure gender justice for women in civil as well as

5 Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, Virginia Saldanha, Kochurani Abraham, Shalini Mulackal, Julie George, Metti Amirtham, Evelyn Monteiro, Rekha Chennattu, Noella Desouza, Patricia Santos, Aruna Gnanadason, Stella Baltazar, Cyrilla Chakkalakal, Joycia Thorat, Philo Thomas, Philo Desouza, Manju Kulapuram, Marcia D'cunha, Anita Cheria are among other feminists who have frequently voiced their views.

ecclesiastical society. Moving towards a community of 'discipleship of equals' demands all church personnel to rediscover the person, vision and mission of Jesus of Nazareth portrayed in the Gospels. As a fitting tribute to Jesus' vision, let me add the following:

The New Testament presents the call of Jesus to discipleship and ministerial service as universally inclusive. They were not restricted by sex, gender roles, marital status, social class, race or nationality. Although much of women's history in the early church has been submerged, it is remarkable that not a single story or statement is transmitted in which Jesus would affirm the subjugation of women under patriarchal norms. The inclusion of women in the leadership of the early Christian community (e.g., Apostle Paul's women co-workers) was indeed a break from the Jewish tradition of the role of women.

It is imperative that the position of women in today's Church together with its misogynist theology and biblical interpretation be subjected to a thorough revision. Women's active involvement and women in leadership are essential to the Church to deepen and enrich its own identity and legitimize its mission as a community of equals, a process that cannot take place when only males are decision makers. By our ability to imbibe the spirit of Jesus, we can challenge the institutional church to liberate itself from its ideological fetters. Empowered by the Spirit of God, we shall continue to motivate pastors/leaders and all God's people to move away from the emphasis on orders and 'divine' unchanging patterns of church life towards an emphasis on an organization that seeks to be faithful to the mission of Jesus Christ in ever changing contexts. Following the example of Jesus, who brought about a Godly revolution, a complete reversal in a person's scale of values, attitudes and actions (e.g., Mt 5:1-12; Lk 6:20-26), we are impelled to resist sinful structures that restrict women's full participation in the life and mission of the Church and society.

Both women and men ought to work in partnership, co-responsibility and assume a participatory style of leadership as desired by Pope Francis. Indeed, this process demands creative criticism, openness, acceptance, inclusiveness and democracy – all urgent needs of our Church and society.

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Dr Sr Pauline Chakkalal of the 'Daughters of St. Paul' is a regular contributor to academic journals and popular periodicals on feminist issues. She holds a PhD in Biblical Theology. She has authored a few books and over a 100 scholarly articles. She is a member of various Biblical and Theological Associations in India and abroad, besides being an active member of 'Satyashodhak', a Mumbai-based Feminist Collective. She has also served as President of the Society for Biblical Studies India (SBSI), an ecumenical Bible scholars' forum. In addition to her academic engagements, she is associated with a few secular and church-related women's organizations, people's movements and is actively involved in women empowerment programmes, and passionately committed to fostering Interreligious (over 25 years) and Ecumenical activities. Email: paulinedsp13@gmail.com ORCID: 0000-0001-7972-0796

Recd: Nov 1, 2021: Accepted Nov 28, 2021: Words: 6475



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