Letter to Pope Francis on Kandhamal Day

Dear Holy Father

I greet you from India, a Christian, a Catholic, a human rights activist, a former Editor, and the former National President of the All India Catholic Union, perhaps Asia’s oldest Laity movement at 99 years of age, and accepted so by the Catholic Bishops Conference of India.

I document the persecution of religious minorities and targeted violence against Dalits and indigenous people to press for remedial action by the State. In doing so, I also document the resilience of the human spirit, and the strength of the Christian faith among the poorest of the poor and the most vulnerable of our community.

It is from them, as much as from you, dear Holy Father, that I derive the inspiration to write to you, the head of our Faith community in the world. I am encouraged by the deep concern you have shown for the marginalised, indigenous people, the members of various tribes of the Americas, Africa and Asia-Pacific, the victims of racism and of caste discrimination, who we know as Dalits. We know your support for the faithful in India, manifest in the empowerment of the sui juris Syro Malabar and Syro Malankara Catholic churches, and in inviting one of own Cardinals as a member of your groups of Counsellors. We count on Oswald Cardinal Gracias as our constant connect with you.

Holy Father, the Faith Community in India is both ancient and nascent. Many trace their roots to Thomas the Apostle, others to the 16th Century or the 17th century. As many have been touched by the Holy Spirit and the love of Jesus Christ and Our Lady as recently as in the last century, or even this. They live in the security of a democratic and republican India where the Constitution guarantees freedom of faith. Since independence, this has been guarantee enough. We have lived in peace.

But there have been moments of trauma in our history. In the dying years of the 18th century, the Sultan of Mysore, Tipu, took into captivity perhaps close to a hundred thousand Catholics from the west coast of Kerala and Mangalore. A large number died of torture, disease in the long march, and under the sword. Till 2008, that was the biggest physical violence against the community. And so far, the victims have not been given the recognition they deserve for being killed for their faith.

Civil strife and the Partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947 also saw Christians killed in the bloodbaths of the time, but their numbers were very small compared to the Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims who lost their lives and their homes. Religious sisters were raped and killed in some regions, and civilians put to death in some towns in north India. Some of it is documented, some not fully.

But it is in 2008 in the district of Kandhamal in the State of Orissa on the eastern coast that we have seen the second biggest pogrom against Christians. It began on 25th August 2008, and continued for several weeks, led by political gangs, with the state complicit or a helpless witness. The figures of the dead could have been as high as those 300 years ago, but for the haven provided by the thick forest that surrounded villages and houses.

When the violence ended and the smoke clouds lifted,  over 60,000 children, women and men, old, young, new born and pregnant women, had fled into the forest. Later 30,000 of them lived a year in government refugee camps. Over 400 villages had been purged of Christians for almost a year, 6,000 and more houses destroyed, together with over 300 churches and every institution of education, health, hospice that had been built by religious clergy and sisters over 50 years. 120 persons were killed, including Father Bernard Digal, a Dalit and Treasurer of the Archdiocese of Cuttack Bhubaneswar which covers Kandhamal. There were many other pastors, evangelists and lay preachers who lost their lives in by sword, machete, hammer or fire, bravely facing death rather than renouncing their faith. Many women were raped, among them a Nun.

Ten years to the day, today, and full justice has eluded the victim-survivors. Most of the killers are free. It took the survivors years in the Supreme Court of India to get commensurate compensation to rebuild their homes.

Building lives is a different matter. Students with promise have had to stop studies. Children suffer from trauma. Families have been broken. Many have no livelihood now, though once they were small but self-sufficient farmers. There have been cases of trafficking.

They have fallen off the safety nets and the conscience of the state. Many feel they have also been abandoned by their brothers and sisters in Christ, left to their own devices, fighting their own battle. This when their fortitude and faith have been a spiritual beacon to the community.

The All India Catholic Union, many in the clergy, specially those from Kandhamal, and some others have in recent years felt the faith of the Kandhamal Christians must be recognised in the way the Church has historically recognised such sacrifice. We have pressed with the Archbishop Cuttack Bhubaneswar, with the four Cardinals and the Hierarchy that the dead of the 2008 Kandhamal violence be recognised by the Church as Martyrs of the Faith.  That is what they are. Their recognition will, we feel, strengthen the faith of the people of the India, specially at a time like we are passing through.

The Archbishop of Cuttack Bhubaneswar has formally started the process. It needs a national movement to give it the pace that is required.

As the head of our Church, as the Pope, we look upon you and pray that the process be expedited. This will refresh and rejuvenate the Church in India, and strengthen the faith of each one of us.

Committing ourselves to  the care of Mother Mary,

We remain your loving children of the Catholic community in India

God bless you

John Dayal

The Parish of St Teresa

Catholic Archdiocese of Delhi

India

25th August 2018.