

# FOLLOWING CHRIST IN POVERTY

Tony Herbert

## *Biographical Note*

I was born in Sydney Australia and educated by the Christian Brothers and the Jesuits. On completing high school I joined the Jesuits in 1960, doing Novitiate and Philosophy in Melbourne. I was then appointed to the then Hazaribag Region, arriving in India in 1965. I completed my regency at St Xavier's School Hazaribag, and after language (Hindi) and under-graduate studies, did theology at St Mary's College Kurseong, and, when the latter was transferred, at Vidya Jyoti, Delhi. After ordination I was again appointed to St Xavier's Hazaribag, and then to Hazaribag parish, followed by tertianship at Sitagarha. I opted to work among the Dalits of Hazaribag district during Tertianship, and subsequently spent ten years living in, and working with, village Dalit communities. In 1991 we went for a sabbatical to the Jesuit-run Behavioural Science Institute in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. On my return, together with other Jesuits, I initiated Prerana Resource Centre, Hazaribag, whose aim is to strengthen the apostolate among the Dalits. I am presently co-ordinator of this Centre.

I received my appointment to India with mixed feelings: what was India like, was I suited to it, capable of coping with it? I left with youthful Jesuit idealism and a spirit of adventure. The journey (two weeks by ship) was literally a rite of passage; it seemed to stress, was symbolic of, leaving something behind – youth? family? a whole world? *my* boats? It served to make real a commitment already made. In later years I was to realize how much freedom it had given. In later years I also realized the wrench it had been for my parents. Feeling awareness was not on our agenda in those days.

*After a period of settling in, I was posted to St Xavier's Hazaribag, a large English medium school with a hostel. Two years of regency there,*

*teaching, hostel supervision, sports, little time to think too much. It was "total institution", a hard and challenging programme, and provided much opportunity to discover my capabilities, and lack of them. Many friendships made in those days are still with me, but India remained very much another world, somewhere there outside the front gate. I could as well have been in Australia.*

One day, during theology a notice appeared on the board: a parish priest some distance away wanted five theologians to give three-day retreats in different villages as preparation for Christmas. I agonized, wanting very much to go, and yet knowing I couldn't manage it. Eventually I wrote my name. The parish priest, a Belgian missionary with a long beard, drove me out to the village, handed me over to the catechist, said he would be back after three days, and drove away. I experienced for the first time the emptiness I would feel in going out to stay in villages. It strips away one's own immediate bearings and supports, but very slowly offers others that are perhaps richer. The three-day retreat was little less than pathetic, the people were patient and loving, and I had crossed, for me, an important barrier. The following summer holidays, in Bhurkunda parish, I gave a string of 5 village retreats over as many weeks.

After ordination I was again posted to St Xavier's, the same place where I had done regency, but with added work and responsibilities. The school was still an English medium enclave; the schedule, fully demanding. I longed to get out into the streams of Indian life. I also wondered why we chose this social class for our concerted attention when there were so many others in such greater and such dire need. After two years the Major Superior recognized my restlessness, and sent me to the local parish. This was a welcome opportunity for pastoral ministry, to small Christian communities around the countryside, mainly evening confessions, morning Mass, visiting families. It also meant moving into the vernacular language, getting to know village life, learning about the lives of the ordinary people.

One day, towards the end of two years, in village Jamuari, it struck me that I could carry on this ministry for a hundred years, it would make little difference to the people. While it did draw on the sources of Christian sacramental life, it was culturally foreign; it bypassed glaring social questions; the people seemed to live in two separate compartments, the Christian and

the tribal. And loving as the people were to me, the visiting priest, I was clearly an outsider. I felt I must enter one community, learn its language and culture, and go with them into their own world. In our area we touched four main communities, Oraon, Santhal, Munda and Dalits. When Tertianship came soon after, I asked the Major Superior if I could work among the Dalits, a request which he granted. Thus began, at the age of 40, what was to be my life's main work.

*The next 10 years were spent in extended touring of the villages and staying in them, endeavouring to be part of the Dalit world. I initially took the role of an anthropological field worker, observing and noting festivals, rites of passage, relationship patterns and such. I had had no training at all in this, but I had long learnt that in the Society you end up doing something for which you have had no training!*

The expectations of the people were for me to provide uplift or development projects that would help the people in their poverty. This particular "development approach" was the tradition of our local church; it was also the response of the government to the poverty of the people. I refused to go along with it. Eventually when people would ask, "then why are you here", my reply would be "because I like being with you." I stylise those words, but it was very true, I was very much enjoying my village stint among them! I was to learn that, whereas many are willing to do things for them from outside, few are ready, and they know it, to go into their world which is defined as "polluted". Being genuinely happy to be among them was itself an unspoken Gospel message, more than the development work for them from outside. The importance of the relationship over the activity was always to stay with me as a guideline.

Two things I learnt during those early years – while there were reasonably good standards of education among the higher caste communities (to which I had contributed at St Xavier's), among the lower communities there was near total illiteracy, of which I had not even been aware. Secondly, there was a regular undercurrent of violence against the Dalits. This was in the form of physical violence whenever they showed the slightest sign independence, or in the chronic violence of a feudal system marked by under-subsistence wages, deprivation of survival resources (land, water,

forest), and bonded labour. Most of all, the violence was in the form of the pejorative identity given to them by caste Hinduism, a stigmatized identity which they themselves have internalized.

In time I did become very active in initiating work - non-formal education centres, sending children to our mission hostels, building a team of co-workers from among the people, involved with legal cases in the courts but this initial period of extended exposure in the Dalit world had been crucial for me.

I enjoyed the outdoor life of village touring. I would catch a local bus from Hazaribag town (two hours), and walk or cycle from village to village following a programme previously given to the people in our monthly meetings. In those days, no motor cycle. The bus and walking were time-consuming, physically tiring, and done in summer heat and monsoon rain. But they were great levellers, something which, as an expatriate, I thought was very important. It was also a way to meet people face to face, on the road, in tea-shops. From such casual visits we got to know some Dalit communities that still have regular contact with us.

*The world of the Dalits was (still is!) something foreign to me. To them I did not know even the basics of village life, was constantly walking over their customs, was unfamiliar with their sub-dialect, and my efforts would probably be best described by the phrase "fumbling incompetence"! Humbling for me, amusing to them. In their world, their knowledge was superior to mine, I depended entirely on them. They would put me up wherever, food came in whatever form, at whatever time, and I learned to be very grateful for it. Unwittingly, this was a happy inversion of the power equation that is normal between priest and people. Life circumstances demanded an asceticism that had a hard edge. This did not come from the religious motivation of a "spiritual person", it was simply the lived ground reality, and in time, like the people, I took it somewhat for granted. But to give it all balance, let me stress that I was often back at base at St Xavier's for periods of time.*

Entering the Dalit world meant more than physical discomfort. The two- week boat trip to India had not removed my urban educated, white, middle-class programming. Now, slowly over the years, circumstances forced

me to rewrite so much of that. The taken-for-granted backdrops of my world no longer held. I now glimpsed this same world from another viewpoint; mine was no longer absolute. And the people taught me that so much of the status and the securities that I treasured were really of no value at all!

This re-scripting included my spirituality. Faith went beyond my Christian religious world-view and symbols. It became more a matter of seeing God present in the midst of apparent darkness, cruel poverty, in the bitterness of our people losing out again and again. It became the faith of Mark's centurion. In situations in which, humanly speaking, one could only say there is no God, it was the people who reaffirmed there was. Who was teaching gospel faith to whom!!

Further, the people have taken me deeper into the Gospel, have shown me its richness in a way that studies did not. I can narrate many experiences that have shown me how God is present already "out there". Those people on the edges are like a modern day Anaweam (God's humble and deserving poor) naked, without the artificial masks and pretensions that I put on, without the props that most people need. This is not to romanticise them, or to say they are better people; the poor can be as perverse as anyone. But there is among them an uncomplicated wisdom, a clarity, a simple joy that comes from having been stripped. In this way the people themselves give great energy; they are the ones who give hope, and that is why I still need to go back to them.

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I was fascinated by their religious world. Underneath the upper layer of classical Hinduism, so well documented, was a subaltern world of folk religion. I took time off, and still do, to participate in their passage rites and festival rituals. There was the time in village Horam when I was witnessing a ritual which the crowds around me were utterly engrossed in and highly enthusiastic about, and I found myself saying "I have done three years of philosophy and four years theology, yet I haven't the faintest idea what's going on here". Such an experience had several outcomes. It drove me to read and study and seek to understand. It helped me see that here in the village there was religious dialogue (a word that we were beginning to use a lot). It seemed to me that religious dialogue must include such folk religion as well as the world's big religions. And it removed the

absoluteness of our Roman Catholic practices as being the only valid religious expressions, the only “system of symbols”, for the Gospel.

In my visits to the villages, I would explicate the Gospel story. “If we want new life, we must be ready to die. Jesus is a model of that. His Passover is nothing less than a map of our own lives”. In those days we would have gospel-prayer gatherings, with devotional singing. I couldn’t sing a note, but co-workers, trained by a fellow Jesuit, filled in. My visit usually focused on these gatherings. In time some groups asked for baptism. We would celebrate the Eucharist. On those occasions when we were in the midst of some justice struggle, it took on a special depth of meaning and feeling, it became a celebration of that struggle. Fear and assurance, helplessness and hope would be there all together. The people might not have been good on their catechism, but on those occasions, the Eucharist’s symbols of brokenness and sharing were extremely powerful. On one occasion our Mass was broken up by a landlord and his gang; a few other times stones rained down on the roof. When we celebrated in the village, the entire group, without distinction of baptised or non-baptised, would assemble; we were all in it together. Giving Communion to the baptised, and not to the others, I found was a counter-sign. The integration of these communities with the established local church also remains a complex issue.

My interaction with other priests and sisters working in social action reveals that among them there is a far too common experience of alienation from the mainstream church. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss this. Suffice it to say that I too have experienced it.

It results from a strong identification with the people they work with, and touches matters such as the tension of having to move constantly between the world of the people and the world of the religious-community (often starkly different - which is the real one?). It touches the blissful ignorance of fellow religious (one’s family!) to the harsh realities of life on the edges, and their apparent reluctance to give themselves to it, often even to acknowledge it. It touches the contrast between our comfortable lives on the one hand, and the unimaginable struggles of marginal people on the other. This is compounded by us proclaiming our poverty as a serious gospel commitment, and the people laughing off theirs with gospel-like simplicity. This creates constant tension, if not anger, and is part of my story. The temptations here are to move into self-pity and seek sympathy, or to nurse a smouldering anger. Sharing with Jesuit companions was a great support and encouragement.

*The alienation felt by religious in social action is simply that experience which their people constantly experience. If we choose to go out to people on the margins, we cannot but also experience their alienation. So let us not lament it. In the beginning I believed ours was an exercise to bring our excluded communities into the mainstream. In practice this would mean that they find their place in wider society as equals, perhaps their acceptance into our local church (ultimately with vocations), our schools, to receive the social recognition they deserved. I saw that my "going out" was to bring "others in". I have learnt that it is not to be; the counter forces are too strong. This is not defeatism, because something does indeed happen, of which more below.*

After 10 years I asked for a sabbatical. Perhaps I was beginning to burn out. A year at the Jesuit-run Behavioural Science Centre in Gujarat was a precious and rewarding break where studies focused on the psychology particular to oppressed peoples. For me, the warm hospitality of the Gujarat Jesuits was something special.

On our return, along with other Jesuits we started Prerana Centre. There we endeavoured to strengthen our Dalit work by training camps that addressed the particular Dalit psychology, with greater stress on them building their own organization. We were not into providing social services, but desperate needs were regularly at our door.

At Prerana, along with our Dalit village work, we also moved into advocacy. In our locality, a serious social issue is the impact of coal mining, on both environment and people. In many ways it is devastating. Without consciously planning it, we began to take up relevant issues on behalf of the affected people to the companies concerned and to the World Bank. Such advocacy also involved much networking with others. These were non-church groups; their high level of commitment and competence was striking. And more study, more reading.

We started with great hopes, but soon realized that in our neo-liberal world such advocacy is a case of David challenging Goliath, only here, our Goliath marches on triumphantly! Which brings us to the question of struggling against impossible odds.

We had faced the question with our Dalit community. Initially I had hoped to be able to bring them from the margins, to mainstream them. I was soon to suspect that this would be very difficult. Especially in social justice issues I soon realized how difficult it was to come out on top, even with the help of good officials in the establishment.

Therefore: - don't do it? Do something else which will give results? Realize there is no alternative and accept it? Surrender to "modern reality"? If the odds are so stacked, why do it?

Merton writes about doing something for the truth of what it is. It is there, so it has to be done, the outcome is secondary. So be it. Why give our efforts to a Dalit community in the face of a strident, all-dominating caste ideology? Why challenge the predatory neo-liberal juggernaut against impossible odds? Because it is there, and it has to be done. This is the reality of our world taken up into Christ's Passover, so we walk it.

Thus I learned more deeply that my Jesuit life was not simply the following of Christ, it was following him in poverty. There are many ways Jesuits can do this. A privileged one is solidarity with people on the margins. It is liberating and life-giving, both for the giver and the receiver. General Congregation 34 speaks of "communities of solidarity".

There is more. There are results, but in unexpected ways. Somebody wrote that the experience of loving is itself the reward of loving, not some payback in another way. There is the joy the engagement itself gives. I enjoy the work, the engagement with the people, the challenge of this priestly work. This is itself a lot.

But there are results also to be seen, the growth of individuals and communities in so many ways. Mustard seed growth.

*Another result is what I have learnt from the poor about the Kingdom of God, something I have already mentioned.*

And there, in finding God present among those on the edges, lies the reason for doing it. And with it the conviction that beyond our human horizon of "no hope", there is a hope and a certainty. Against all human logic.



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All this served to give flesh to Ignatian understandings learned long ago. Perhaps a basis had been laid in the novitiate by regular reading of Examen 101 which had told me about putting on the same dress and uniform as Christ our Lord. This is spelt out in the Exercises, all the way through. His gift, beyond all proportion to the receiver or the response. What more to say?