

PROVINCIAL CIRCULAR

Salesian Province of Mary Help of Christians, Guwahati, Assam, India

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SPECIAL CIRCULAR

My Dear Confreres,

Greetings from Valdocco, Turin!

The book of **GENESIS**, the first book of the most widely read book and the best seller for centuries worldwide, the **BIBLE** begins with the phrase, “In the beginning.” In the beginning, God dispelled darkness and created light with his solemn pronouncement, “Let there be Light” and there was light. After the creation of light, we read with a feeling of awe that God created the universe, the world and everything in it. And every time God completed one part of creation, he would exclaim that “it was good.”

And today, in the midst of such demoralising human tragedy globally, we can still emphatically say that God is the light and he dispels the darkness of despair and depression, provided the human beings, the best and the masterpiece of creation act responsibly. Even as we continue to battle in order to eliminate the virus, I hope that the human beings have learned lessons of right living with God, with each other and with nature and environment around us. The gradual return to normalcy is bound to usher in a better and healthier future. This however indeed will require discipline, patience, faith and collective effort.

Economic Recession Requires Disciplined Response

The abrupt stoppage of economic activities in many parts of the world, the mandatory lockdown and the consequent decline in world economy because of the Covid-19 outbreak had its telling and unprecedented impact in world history. Even as the gradual relaxation of curfew and lockdown is happening, you may see that there is not much of economic movement and business happening—either there are no supplies or there are no takers, even if there are supplies!

The worst of the coronavirus does not seem to be over as yet. Initially, it may be the actual spread of the virus that we feared, but now, it is the collateral economic damages that such a spread has brought in, that we may be fearing. It is not an economic slowdown, we are used to that. But it is a sudden slump and a terrible collapse. It is not a pothole in the economy, but a huge crater! Covid-19 is the tragedy of global magnitude—it is an all-round

crisis: it has affected almost all the facets of our life, many of which we were tending to take for granted.

Indian Scenario of the Impact of Covid-19

As I mentioned above, I still feel diffident to say that the pandemic is tamed in India. It may even be just beginning. The statistics shows increase in infections and deaths. Some leaders are already telling that now is the time to learn to live with the virus. The lockdown was enforced early, with stringent enforcement measures. There were however violators aplenty and over time, there was difficulty in maintaining thousands of stranded migrant workers. There was also a need to understand their restlessness to return home even walking thousands of miles.

From the economic point of view, the World Bank and credit rating agencies have downgraded India's growth for the fiscal year 2021 with the lowest figures India has seen in three decades since India's economic liberalization in the 1990s.

The former Chief Economic Advisor to the Government of India has said that India should prepare for a negative growth rate in FY21 and that the country would need a ₹710 lakh crore (US\$10 trillion) stimulus to overcome the contraction. However, the International Monetary Fund projection for India for the Financial Year 2021-22 of 1.9% GDP growth is the highest among G-20 nations.

Within a month unemployment rose from 6.7% on 15 March to 26% on 19 April. During the lockdown, an estimated 14 crore (140 million) people lost employment. More than 45% of households across the nation have reported an income drop as compared to the previous year. The Indian economy is expected to lose over ₹32,000 crore (US\$4.5 billion) every day during the first 21-days of complete lockdown which was declared following the coronavirus outbreak.

Though the above statistics are not updated, we can get a pretty good idea of what we are facing or going to face in the coming months and years. The future is uncertain, with all the predictions about future poverty.

This crisis has hit the poor, as in other times, the hardest. The plight of the poor in general and especially those of the stranded migrant workers is deplorable. Many of these impoverished, hungry and thirsty people died on the way. More people seemed to have died out of hunger and starvation than of coronavirus.

Many youth especially the semi-skilled and those working in private and non-regularised menial job sectors faced abrupt termination and had to return home. Most of them are the bread winners of the family and there is no certainty for them about getting back to jobs in the near future.

Feeling the Pulse and the Anguish of the Poor, the Marginalised, the Migrants especially of Youth sans Boundaries, as Don Bosco did

Many youth, even the adults from the Northeast, who contribute significantly to the nation building through sectors like hospitality, security, constructions, textile industry, electronic companies, etc., in the metropolitan cities have suffered displacement and had to return home with bleak future. While to the young who went outside the Northeast to study or to work in their professional fields and had to return, the doors are still opened either to return to the cities once the situation improved or get absorbed in institutions closer home. Even from the city of Guwahati and Shillong, the innumerable migrant and household workforce had to return to the rural villages. In short, the future projects a people displaced from jobs, in rural set ups and in need of regular income.

In this scenario, following the footsteps of St John Bosco, the Salesians could collaborate with the Government, the Church and other Social organizations to come up with some creative, urgent and practical strategies to answer, at least partially, to such human emergencies. The observations, listed above are not so much about pessimism or optimism, but a realistic acceptance of our economic situation in the world, in our country and in our region. We believe that the Lord speaks to us through the signs of the times, and this economic crisis that we are living now is also one such sign from the Lord. We put our hope in the Lord, who is the Lord of history.

Many of our communities have already helped the poor and the needy in their vicinity. It should not be only one time assistance. We could judiciously continue to do it, as long as there is a need, and never mind the pinch of it on our finances. Besides while carrying out this temporary assistance, we could think of something permanent, long term and youth-centred. We could liaison with the Government, the District Administration and other non-governmental organizations, if possible.

Pope Francis writes that we remember that the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care. “Before all else, the poor need God and his love, made visible by ‘the saints next door,’ people who by the simplicity of their lives express clearly the power of Christian love. God uses any number of ways and countless means to reach people’s hearts. Certainly, the poor come to us also because we give them food, but what they really need is more than our offer of a warm meal or a sandwich. The poor need our hands, to be lifted up; our hearts, to feel anew the warmth of affection; our presence, to overcome loneliness. In a word, they need love.”

Environmental Care and Use of Land

The coronavirus catastrophe has come in a big way to invite us to return to nature and environmental preservation. In many parts of the world, we have experienced an increased rainfall, decrease in various types of pollutions, and perhaps even a drastic decrease in global warming. Arundhati Roy writes, “And even while the virus proliferates,

who could not be thrilled by the swell of birdsong in cities, peacocks dancing at traffic crossings and the silence in the skies?”

We could see how the earth took care of itself. The over-exploitation of the earth and its resources came to a standstill, at least briefly. The pandemic has brought home so many values, and one thing we need to arrive at certainly is the value of environmental consciousness. Environmental consciousness is nothing but to realize not only that we love nature, but that nature loves us. In this regard we need to learn the art of environmental care and preservation. We need to press forward a sustainable development, and stop abusing nature.

In the wake of this pandemic, what can be clearly seen is the depletion and/or scarcity of external resources. Therefore, the need to tap the internal resources. We in the Province need to begin using our land to the maximum extent towards meeting our own needs as much as possible. Small though it might be, but definitely it is a praise-worthy way forward.

Hence, it will be a timely initiative for every community to do a brainstorming exercise and begin to do something concrete and tangible on the land which is available to us. The mother earth certainly will take care of the needs of her children. As the ancestral wisdom of the tribes of Northeast instruct, giving rest to the land is also an important aspect of the care of nature. Several communities such as Tangla, Dimakuchi, Mendal, Don Bosco School Tura and others who have already done something in this direction by planting cash crops and trees.

Financial Discipline and Towards Pooling together of all that we have

My dear confreres, in this context of depletion in world economy, the need to re-build it globally, financial stress in our own institutions, the foregone conclusion about the paucity of financial assistance from within the country and abroad, the simmering fear and the reality of certain business minded groups or individuals taking advantage of the situation and generate hike in prices of essential commodities, the need to be always with the poor and the needy without counting the cost and support them, etc., we need to accept serenely and accept the need for an even greater financial discipline and transparency, personally and as a community.

Over these years, it has been our collective effort to practise fidelity in religious life, community life, financial accountability and transparency ever more radically and there has definitely been a great success, with a few yet to be streamlined, which the office of the Economer has agreed to give the topmost priority in this second stint. As we continue to make this effort, I feel compelled during my moments of reflection and prayer that we need to calmly accept the fact that, if the life of the poor undergo drastic changes, we too need to change our life of poverty and life of financial discipline and live what we preach.

As expected, there will be less and less help for our mission by way of projects. This could be the best opportunity for us to manage with our own resources and gradually work towards self-sustainability and mobilisation of resources from within.

In this context, we would like to say clearly that the Provincial and especially the Economist must know most accurately the financial condition of the community. The money belongs to everyone and not to the Rector, the Principal, the Parish Priest or the Administrator.

The Provincial, assisted by the Economist is responsible for the transparent and judicious utilization of finance and other resources. While I say that we have some success stories in this, there have also been wilful aberrations, incidences of hiding information or finances, spending without proper discussion and justifying it, spending outside the budget, swindling, etc.

While we encourage all to keep working hard on disciplined financial administration, the Provincial and the Council will keep insisting on greater fidelity—individually and as a community. As per the article 197 of General Regulations, the solidarity contribution needs to continue even during these pandemic times. The solidarity fund enables us to administer the Provincial House, our journeys for animation, contribution to the Rector Major's Fund and the SPCSA, the formation houses, right from the apostolic schools, aspirantates, prenovitiate, novitiate, the philosophates up to the theologates.

Practical Suggestions

It was Mamma Margaret who said that “Extreme cases require extreme remedies”. The Covid-19 epidemic is of extreme nature.

The rich may not feel the pinch of the negative impact and definitely, no Salesian institution will suffer want, though some may go through inconveniences and difficulties in decision-making as regards the fee collection, disbursement of salaries of Staff and the need to break the FDs or corpus fund, etc. It is also quite natural that many will have a tendency to think only about their safety and forget the needy.

There will be quite many who will seize the opportunity to make money. There are often people especially in power and authority, both religious and secular who make use of the times of calamities to make money for themselves. We need to be careful of this.

The communities under the leadership of the Rector/Leader of the Community must sit together and chalk out the way forward for the community mission and apostolate.

As we involve ourselves in educational apostolate, quality time could be given for planning the school and the hostel management post Covid-19. Collective decisions are always better and well accepted in this regard. The community level meetings could still be discussed in the House Council and then the decisions could still be discussed and

endorsed in the Managing Committee. Open-mindedness and willingness to accept others' views and opinions play crucial role in this. Issues such as making up of the loss hours of teaching-learning in our institutions, the salaries and the fees, attention to the Government Directives, etc., could be discussed and collective decisions could be arrived at.

The insistence on the need to maintain the corpus fund and the fixed deposits, which to a large extent have taken place, has seen its wisdom. They are meant for such unforeseen circumstances and hence could be of great advantage.

Special attention could be paid to the following suggestions:

- Close examination and reduction of personal expenditures whenever possible. Live a more frugal life than what we have been living up to now. It will certainly help us to reduce expenditures on ourselves and enable us to assist the poor and the needy.
- Our travels especially in our private vehicles which have a heavy toll on our expenditures could also be re-looked at and properly planned. It will be good to ask ourselves the “why”, the “how” and the “necessity” of some of the travels that we usually make.
- The communities could keep on hold the plan to purchase new vehicles during these days of hardship around. We should avoid costly, non-essential and non-urgent renovations too. We could go for the simpler but functional structures. They give stronger witness to our life of poverty. Besides, we need to maintain the infrastructure, the vehicles, the rooms and the compound much better.
- In some communities, there are surplus vehicles. Unlike most people in the families who do not have one vehicle per member, we tend to have personalised vehicles. This is a complaint that I have often received. We could learn to share them which would mean acceptance of inconveniences that may arise out of it.
- Financial accountability, transparency and sincerity need more effort: proper registration of the money collected, depositing the money in the bank, using the joint signatures, making all payments through cheques, etc. Such exercise will bring in proper planning, administration, reduction in expenses and some savings.
- Keeping in mind the poor in the world and in our vicinity, we could whenever applicable adopt simpler food habits in the community and reduce wastages.
- During these pandemic times, study the possibility of celebrating birthdays and other celebrations as less extravagant as possible.

- Each community could compulsorily organise the *Scrutinium Paupertatis* (A Community Evaluation of our Vow of Poverty) during its Day of the Community or Assembly of Confreres. The Rectors/Leaders of Communities could organize it without fail.
- Our Province and the communities should be well-known for being pro-poor a little more visibly. The poor are our assets and are not a burden on our finances. The institutions and communities could sponsor more poor students and give fee concessions to many deserving students.
- Despite the financial crunch, we need to give a decent remuneration to all our domestic and support staff. Fortunately, so far no one has come up with the suggestion of cutting down the wages of our staff, but even those who are thinking of it, kindly drop the idea at the earliest.
- As stated above, now is the most appropriate time to plan as a community, how to make a good use of the land under our care. Make the land productive, and avoid unnecessary and too many trips to the market.
- The closer we are to nature, the healthier we will be. And, health is wealth, and also, prevention is better than cure. Let us take care of ourselves by coming closer to nature, and adopting natural means and physical exercises to take care of our health.

Conclusion

One of the major tasks of spirituality is to become poor. We need to become materially poor. Therefore, I ask you to get into our mind that less things, less conveniences, less money, less power, etc., is better for our spiritual welfare. Let us avoid all temptations to comfortable mediocrity. We need to show real poverty in our lives, not theoretical poverty.

This circular is intended to focus on the present crisis, and how we could respond and contribute towards a quicker and healthier return to normalcy. I feel we could respond to the economic crisis by being more faithful to our vow of poverty, and thus serve God and youngsters in a fitting manner. Let us be more proactive and allow God to work in and through us. May God bless you all!

Yours affectionately in Don Bosco,



Fr Januarius S Sangma, SDB
Provincial

