

Brief update on Indian Catholic Forum conference in Varanasi

The Indian Catholic Forum (ICF) organized a two day conference (Feb.17/18) named as “TOWARDS A SONODAL CHURCH AND SECULAR SOCIETY”, and requested NECARF to send representatives. With blessings from members, and also from our Ecclesiastical Advisor, three of us – James Pochury, Simon Gaithanrong, and I, attended the meeting. While James and Simon came from Delhi where they are based, I went from Goa. Prior to this, we knew very little about ICF, apart from being familiar with Chhotebhai, the Convenor, who regularly writes on NECARF Review on pressing Catholic issues.

Participants: About 35 people from different parts of India were to attend, but one of them unfortunately had a heart attack three days prior, therefore could not make it. Four others regretted at the eleventh hour due to some urgent commitments. Though small in number, the participation was of very high quality, which included 7 priests, who strongly felt that the Catholic Church needs the active involvement of Lay people to grow as a universal Church.

The Venue: The meeting took place inside the Matridham Ashram, a place where thousands of people from all faith come to seek blessings of Jesus every Sunday. The Centre is run by the IMS fathers, with Rev. Fr. Anil Dev, as the in charge, who while delivering on a topic, “**Jesus at the Heart of a Synodal Church**”, told us that the largest gatherings (5000 approximately) are on Easter Services, because people collect the Holy water and share with their family members. He was also categorical that for those who come to seek Jesus’s blessings, the *Ganga Jal* in their homes is now replaced by the Holy water. Amongst many questions he answered, Fr. Anil said he did not think necessary to baptize them as Catholic because they are already Disciples of Christ, who deeply believe in Him. Secondly, though located in a Hindu heartland, the Ashram neither received any threat, nor have they been leveled charges of conversion. He conjectured that it could be because these devotees were BJP supporters politically.

Topics discussed: The following were the Topics presented, discussed and deliberated.

1. Introduction of ICF work, an introduction
2. Synodality in the light of Vatican II
3. Jesus at the Heart of a Synodal Church
4. An Indian Face of the Christian Faith
5. The Conversion Debate
6. Status of Women in the Catholic Church
7. Threat to Secularism, and
8. The Saffronisation of North East India

Each of these topics were presented by different individuals, and discussed by the House. Yours faithfully was given the privilege of speaking on “**The Saffronisation of North East India**” as representative of NECARF, and people received it well.

Besides, the above Topics, there was a recounting of how people who cared for the Church struggled to convince the Vatican to take cognizance of Bishop William KA, then Bishop of Mysore Diocese, for having illicit relationship with a female. The Chronological recounting, beginning from 23.1.2016, was collective done by four priests from the same Diocese, who were the key movers of what is known as the “**Mysore’s struggle for Justice**”. On January 6, 2023, Bishop William was ordered to go on leave by the Vatican.

The outcome:

- a) ICF have decided to continue functioning as the watchdog against wrong doings in the Catholic Church without being aggressive or confrontational posturing.
- b) Encourage Lay participation as laid down in the Vatican II document
- c) Empowerment of women within the Church, and
- d) Speak against threat to Secularism based on provisions of the Indian Constitution

Our commitment: We have assured ICF that NECARF shall always support any move taken up by the Forum, which we consider are for the good of the Church, as long it remains non-confrontational. In our personal capacity, Simon and I have volunteered to be in the Core group of the Forum. I also volunteered to head the Media team of the Forum as Convenor.
