**STATEMENT OF THE NATIONAL CONSULTATION.**

**Women in the Church: Reading the Signs of the Times.**

**4th - 6th October, 2019 at Pune**

We, 95 consecrated women from India gathered at a National Consultation organized by Streevani and Ishvani Kendra, Pune, from 4th to 6thOctober 2019, to reflect on the theme Women in the Church; reading the “Signs of the Time”. We embarked on a journey to challenge ourselves to bring about transformation both in ourselves and in the Church in keeping with the vision of Christ.

We were encouraged by the words of Bishop Thomas Dabre at the start of the consultation who emphasized the importance of the theme, which requires an enhanced awareness and consciousness of what is Church.He challenged the participants to embody fearlessness in the face of challenges togo beyond towards what Jesus instituted – an inclusive universal community.

We acknowledge the Vatican II vision of Church as the People of God, based on our common baptismal vocation which makes us members of the body of Christ and equal disciples. However,we find that the history of the evolution of the Church firmly established it as an institution apparently resting on three pillars of secrecy, patriarchy and hierarchy. In the process we have lost the culture of diversity of the early Church where women functioned as partners in ministry.

To bring equality back it is essential to underline some crucial signs of the time in the Indian context that will create a consciousness to negotiate partnership in the church.

To read the signs of the time it is important that we develop a feminist consciousness, critically evaluate current structures,values and practices and build solidarity across gender, class, caste, and other divides to help transform lives.

The organizing principles of Indian society like caste, class and gender with its toxic masculinity and toxic femininity affects the Church consciously and unconsciously. Patriarchy, the basic organizing principle thrives on binaries. Therefore, spaces are divided between male and female as are roles and responsibilities, thus giving the male spaces of power and status and females the spaces of caring and nurturing. Hierarchy is applied in all these spaces giving males domination over females. Structures of power developed within binaries place women in an inferior position.

Women religious who form a large percentage of the workforce of the Church are programmed for conformity and vulnerability through a process of compliance, identification and internalization within the structure of patriarchy and hierarchy in our congregations and in the Church. We realize that the liberating vow of obedience to God has to be reclaimed. We need to challenge and resist stereotypes and binaries that keep women in positions of subservience and enslavement.

Clericalism is a cancer that breeds on power games of domination and exploitation affecting priestly life and ministry. Its destructive impact seriously disturbs parish life and Church ministries of women religious and the laity.

We are subjected to different manifestations of clericalism like misuse of the pulpit, denial of sacraments, public humiliation, imposition of biased practices like covering the head, disrespectful communication, etc.

The socio-cultural impact of patriarchy is reinforced in priestly and religious life where liberties, freedoms and spaces are demarcated, power lines are drawn and women religious are often allocated tasks of servitude like cleaning, decorating, cooking, housekeeping, etc., and employment which is unpaid or under paid.

We were challenged to examine whether the prophetic commitment of our congregations is diminishing our zeal to configure ourselves to Christ. Is our diminishing prophetic commitment breeding into our formation a passion for comfort culture?

Our growing consciousness of the context, underscores the importance of ongoing personal and communitarian transformation to courageously challenge the culture of silence and structural exclusion that keeps us unheard and invisible; put in place mechanisms to address the excesses of clericalism; create forums where religious women feel heard and their issues addressed; create institutional mechanisms to address the issues of sexual harassment as per the requirements of the civil law with regard to places of work.

We cannot support the rights of the poor and marginalised and not assert our own rights or choose to stay silent and uninvolved when the rights of consecrated women are in jeopardy. We are called to work towards giving all voiceless a voice in Church and in society.

In the context of the experience of discrimination and devaluation of the worth of women in the Church negotiations need to be made that will result in authentic partnership of women and men in the life and mission of the Church. The first step in this negotiation is the conscientization of both Christian men and women about their equal dignity and worth as humans before God. The second step is to reform the organizational dimension of the Church that reflects the equality of women and men in all aspects of Church’s life and the third step for the entire Church is to proclaim the equality of all humans through all means available creatively, consistently and convincingly.

To safeguard the value of human life we the people of God are all called to be partners, truth tellers and prophets who integrate mature affectivity along with intellectual and managerial skills. We consciously affirm “thou shall not” submit to an economy of exclusion and inequality.

For commitment to action we need to:

1. Draw out a path through dialogue towards a discovery of truth, where mutual trust is restored for respectful relationships and partnership in the Church
2. Work towards ensuring inclusive participatory decision-making structures.
3. Create mechanisms where religious women can have safe spaces to tell our truth, be listened to and experience support and solidarity.
4. Counter clericalism by demystifying the priesthood to recover its original character of self-emptying leadership.
5. Educate and empower members of our Congregations to grow in gender sensitivity and the understanding of clericalism, sexism, patriarchy and feminist consciousness to reduce the gap between binaries.
6. Consciously use gender sensitive language in communication, hymns, prayer and liturgies.
7. Create spaces to interact and address common concerns of women such as internalisation of patriarchy and its manifestations of abuse, harassment, denial of rights, property issues etc.
8. Courageously take the risk of practicing religious resistance, dissent and disobedience rather than unchallenged compliance when we face intimidation or our dignity within the Church is threatened. Prophets need to be persistent!
9. Set up mechanisms in congregations at all levels to prevent any form of abuse, and/or offer **protection**, redressal, support to those affected.
10. Work towards transparency with traceable processes and accountability at all levels in structures, systems and all we do in our congregations and in our Church

Initial and ongoing formation should

1. Enable sisters to discern and dialogue with regard to personal and apostolic life.
2. Enable sisters to develop self-esteem and self-worth to assert themselves to challenge and counter all forms of verbal and non-verbal harassment and abuse that denies them respect and dignity in all areas of their life.
3. Include gender policy of the CBCI and Constitution of India in the formation curriculum
4. Develop a culture of continuous formation that is not just informative but also performative, moving from being a ‘formation-ritual’ to being, challenging and motivating the formees to commit radically and serve generously the people on the margins.

Mary of the gospels, at Cana, the foot of the cross and at the Cenacle, is the Marian archetype we need. Strong, bold, courageous, she moved from pain to power.

We have to tap into the power of the Spirit of God present within us to become prophets who speak truth to power, to stand up against the injustice being done to women among us.

We have to work at the grass roots to ensure that we have communities that are rooted in the gospels and live according to its values.

There is a continual need for renewal and renewed search for pathways to “build a new Church and social order which is egalitarian and inclusive”