

Evolution of Spirituality in our Presentation Story in India

“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience: we are spiritual beings having a human experience” Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Nano’s Life of Prayer

Nano’s response to the call of God to ministry among the poor was sustained by her times of prayer and solitude. The first Constitution of the Union approved in 1986 emphasized the apostolic thrust of her prayer life. In C7 it is stated, “The more she moved among the people, the more she was drawn to give time to prayer.” This apostolic thrust to prayer, however, was short lived.

Pre Union: Monastic Spirituality

From the year 1804 when the first Constitution of the Presentation Sisters was approved and the Congregation officially recognised by Rome, the Monastic way of life became part and parcel of our identity. In the section of spirituality it defined how, when and what we prayed, and adherence of each Community/Individual to a definite “Horarium” became one of the hallmarks of a true Religious person. The whole day was punctuated by different Spiritual Exercises and Prayers, with the Divine Office being chanted from early morning with Matins and Lauds, followed by the Small Hours of Prime, Tierce, Sext, and None during the day, Vespers in the evening and ending with Compline at night before going to bed. Other Spiritual Exercises included Holy Mass, Weekly Confessions, Mental Prayer, Particular Examen, Spiritual Reading, the Rosary, the Stations of the Cross, Holy Hours, and Benedictions etc. Private devotions were also encouraged. The understanding was, “The more, the better” each of these being sources of grace and a sure way to our goal in personal holiness. Silence during the day and the Grand Silence at night were seen as aids to a spirit of reflection and peace. During meals which were eaten in silence a spiritual book was read.

Vatican 11: Seeds of Apostolic Spirituality

The dawn of Vatican II in 1961-65 brought about a major change in our ways of Spirituality. We were encouraged to go back to our roots in the charism of our Foundress, Nano Nagle, which was Apostolic in nature and not Monastic. As a result the apostolic life became the lens from which to view our movement in our spirituality. This meant gradually cutting down on many of the Spiritual exercises, while trying to balance the need for a basic grounding in contemplation that would colour and give life to our apostolic work. It also meant balancing the need for both personal and communal prayer. The awareness that prayer and mission are one, slowly began taking root. In reality it took several years of “chaos” to make this shift and traces of the old separations are still in evidence. The Union Chapter of 1981 helped us to understand this movement from a Monastic to an Apostolic way of life and spirituality by its thrust, “The revitalization of our apostolic religious commitment as Presentation Sisters.”

Union: Living through Chaos in Spirituality

The coming together of several autonomous Presentation groups (another Monastic tradition) in 1976 brought its own upheaval with different groups having a variety of understandings and practices in Spirituality, the majority being still quite monastic. The first General Chapter in 1976 was very clearly oriented to the beginnings of the movement towards the poor and marginalised, popularly known at the time as “option for the poor”, calling forth a relook at

our spirituality. The traditional exercises of pre Vatican days still had a strong hold in our expressions of spirituality. With the encouragement of this Chapter, that “the principle of pluriformity in prayer forms be accepted” new forms began emerging as “Shared” Prayer, Charismatic Prayer, Praying with Scripture, Sharing of faith experiences etc. The movement in India towards Inculturation, encouraged by Vatican II, gave rise to praying in ways more in touch with Indian traditions, with the use of bhajans, rituals from Hinduism, yoga, ashram experience, and learning about the Sacred Scriptures of other religions. It was both chaotic and exciting! While some embraced these new expressions with great enthusiasm, others were more fearful about what they saw as a betrayal of Christianity.

*“And when the old words die out on the tongue,
New melodies break forth from the heart,
And where the old tracks are lost,
New country is revealed with its wonders”*
Rabindranath Tagore

First Union Constitution

1986 saw the culmination of years of work on our first Constitution with all communities across the globe being involved in the process. The Chapter of 1986 stated very clearly, “The thrust of our prayer is apostolic, flowing into and from life, so that we experience prayer and mission as an integrated whole” (C37) This sense of Oneness of prayer and mission which was seeded after Vatican II finally became a reality in our understanding, even if it would take more time to actually live in this spirit. Two other seeds sown in the Constitution for further development are, “Together we discover...in the beauty of creation, the mysterious presence of God” C38 and the fact that compared to earlier Constitutions the new Constitution combined Prayer and Community in one Chapter, rather than separating them. Are these both a foretaste of different aspects of what we now call “Spirituality of Being in Communion”? Seeds are planted scores of years before the reality of their blossoming. Evolution is a slow but sure process of growth. As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin says, “*Evolution is a light illuminating all facts, a curve that all lines must follow*”

General Chapter, 1991

The vision of Vatican II was strongly upheld and Presentations were invited “*to feel the anguish of people and their dreams for wholeness.*” Awareness Programmes were arranged in the Province for Social Analysis, to enable sisters be “*Generative women of faith and compassion, in touch with the passion and zeal for the mission of Jesus*”. Sisters moved to the peripheries in city slums and tribal India, experiencing the plight of the marginalised. *The call to work for justice at all levels* was taken seriously by the sisters. This exposure flowed into a Spirituality of action/reflection, which enriched personal lives and communities. At the same time the challenge to work for justice caused friction in communities and relationships.

General Chapter, 1996

Vatican II continued inspiring Spirituality. The call *to affirm and claim our dignity as women, move into ministries related to justice, honour diversity and engage in inculturation*, went deeper when communities began using other Scripture(s) for prayer.

There was also pain involved in moving away from Institutions to be immersed in life of the poor.

The oppression of all women in society and church, as an issue of injustice, was reflectively held and the Chapter urged continual theological and scriptural reflection. This has been a challenge in a patriarchal Society like India. Coming to egalitarian, mutually loving relationships has many hues, doubly impacted by the religious training and understanding of vows and spirituality.

A new dimension stretched us to hold ***“Wholeness of Creation, Earth and Cosmos”*** as part of our Spirituality. Care of the land we owned was taken seriously and steps taken to reverence and nurture these as Sacred.

General Chapter, 2001

Charism..... Spirituality was the main theme of this Chapter. There was a strong invitation to choose **God like compassion** in doing justice in the way of Jesus, and celebrate diversity in cultures. It insisted on a profound interaction between contemplation/action and care of Creation. The link between what we use/ buy without violating human rights was taken up seriously and seen as part of our spirituality. Mahatma Gandhi’s Talisman made us conscious of how we need to see from “bottom up”.

Community is Mission and that Right relationships are integral was emphasised. Relationships, being vital to living spirituality made us choose to struggle to right our relationships, taking guidance and direction as needed, **”an accompanied quest for the fire within”**.

Community prayer was prepared creatively- using Scriptures, Nano Story and tapping on cultural riches. We attempted to make **Dialogue, Discernment and Participation** as a way of life.

Congregational Gathering - 2006

This gathering called us to a ***“Spirituality of Being in Communion that seeks God in the interconnectedness of the whole of Creation and empowers active love for self, others and all of nature”***. This had to be gradually unwrapped and flow into a wholesome living stemming from a deeper understanding of the story of the Cosmic Christ in the Universe.

We were invited to ***“Be Still...Be Still...Move beyond the possible.”*** Communities planned times for stillness before formal prayer or at some specific time daily. Practices like Mindfulness, Vipassana, Zen was taken up by sisters to grow in stillness and contemplation.

Art and Creativity found a place in the documents and colour and dance and creative rituals flowed into our way of praying in communities.

The UN - Earth Charter, CEDAW, CRC found prominent place in reflection and prayer, and became a prism for looking into just ways and drawing inspiration for spirituality and mission.

There have been tensions while sisters attempted to be faithful and balance many dimensions of Spirituality to which we were invited: Personal/Community, Traditions/Inculturation, Inclusion of Justice, Church, Universe story, Cosmic Spirituality.

Congregational Gathering - 2012

The theme was “Awakening to the Mystery of God.”

The invitations related to Spirituality were,

- *live lightly as Pilgrim People,*
- *Become Heart centred women like Mary and Nano,*
- *Aware of being God’s Beloved, and recognising the other as God’s Beloved*
- *Committed to Eucharistic living, becoming love poured out.*
- *To nurture our CALL, by entering the still places within.*
- *befriend blessedness and brokenness,*
- *Gaze on Jesus, the human face of God.*

The struggle to hold the flame of being Mystics and Prophets was a challenge, as much was expected at all levels.

Much energy and time was spent in processes to restructure the Unit, completed in 2015. As such the CG invitations failed to get the needed attention.

The poor quality of our relationships in community, makes us question how serious are we in growing in recognition of the other as God’s beloveds and befriending personal blessedness and brokenness and valuing the invitations of the CG.

The UN SDGs became a source for reflection, work and planning, and communities planned to make things happen.

Congregational Gathering – 2018

Preparations for the CG, introduced the practice of “Contemplative Dialogue” which has been a reflective way of conversing together with respectful listening and has facilitated discernment in a life giving way which hopefully will help us to respond to the call, “**What IF...we consciously love one another.**”

Moving on from 2018, may our hearts and our lives move us to,

Live contemplatively
Walk lightly on Earth,
Witness Prophetically.