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Lalita Beero and her husband receive recognition April 24 from Bishop Sarat Chandra Nayak. (Sujata Jena)



by Sujata Jena

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Lalita Beero, an unlettered and homebound homemaker from Mohana, a rural village of the Gajapati district of the eastern Indian state of Odisha, is a member of the diocesan synodal team of the Diocese of Berhampur.

"I used to be very fearful," she said. "Today, I can stand before the crowd and speak a few words. I can mingle with all. I am happy to be part of this team. I am learning about some rules and norms of the Catholic Church which I never knew."

Lalita has traveled to different parishes with the bishop and with the synodal team for meetings. "It is beyond my belief I could tour with Bishop Sarat Chandra Nayak and other esteemed members of the DST in and outside the diocese," she said.

Asked how Lalita could work with the diocesan synodal team, diocesan coordinator and synod contact person Fr. Martin Chintamoni said, "Though Lalita is unlettered she gives a lot of time to the church activities and other developmental works silently. She can motivate and bring many men and women to the church through her simple acts of prayers and charity."

The synod on synodality is indeed a grace-filled opportunity for the people of God. It has helped them to go through a conversion experience and to journey with Jesus for a more just, inclusive, fraternal, free, equitable and peaceful world.



The faithful at Anugraha Peetha (The Center of Grace) greet Fr. Martin Chintamani after daily Mass on his priesthood ordination anniversary on June 5. In the spirit of synodality, Chintamoni, coordinator at the center, has prepared women and men to be acolytes, musicians. retreat preachers and community mobilizers. (Sujata Jena)

I had an opportunity to be part of synodal meetings in the three dioceses of Odisha. In some dioceses, synodality was discussed with the children, youth, women's groups, parents, small Christian communities, priests and religious. Wherever they took it seriously, they experienced immense participation of all as a vibrant parish.

I also met Medardo Nayak, a cook/house manager of Anugraha Peetha (the Center of Grace, a lay center in the Diocese of Berhampur) who also helps as an altar server at daily Mass and occasional retreats and renewal programs. "It is an honor to perform the supporting task at the altar. I am dignified as a child of God," he said.

In the spirit of synodality, the center's coordinator, Fr. Martin Chintamoni — who has studied magisterium and scriptures — has prepared a handful of women and men as acolytes, choir groups, instrument players, retreat preachers and community mobilizers. They serve the mission of the church, as every baptized Christian is called to do.

India is strongly patriarchal and follows the "dominant male" pattern. This has seeped into Church administration and worship, with a few dominant men taking the lead and acting as decision-makers.

The lay faithful generally "pray, pay and obey." Women, even religious sisters, play hardly any visible role in the church. Thanks to Pope Francis' wisdom and audacity in calling for a synod on synodality, Now, there is an echo of "we the church" by word of mouth and in formal and informal gatherings.

Religious sisters, priests and lay faithful have been participating in elaborate discussions and deliberation, making a plan of action to build the Kingdom of God with the pressing local issues and sociopolitical and economic challenges.

The church has a wonderful spirit, with people learning to reflect on it. The synodal process is bringing transformation and awakening in people's hearts, when it is taken seriously, and makes a better future for the church.

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The synod 2022-2023 is an invitation to the entire Catholic community, yet some dioceses have not taken it seriously. The laypeople of those dioceses have longed to be part of it but missed the process, as these dioceses have done nothing or too little about it. Sadly, they will perpetuate the power structure, which concentrates on the traditional male-dominated church, and will be lost to the renewal of the church.

But those dioceses that participated in the synodal process will be supported by the people to be a witnessing church.

The topic of synodality is timely because there are violations of this concept at different levels. One is the misunderstanding of a vow of obedience, in its sociopolitical-economic and cultural aspects.

We may consider someone an extraordinarily powerful and almighty person, but instead of understanding their role as servant leaders, they understand their

authority as political power and forget the responsibility that comes up with it. It is a violation when people have no voice.

Synodality gives voice to the unheard, to the periphery, and it is not only to be practiced in the church. We are invited to live it in our own family, community, workplace, church and society.

Recently the general government of our congregation, the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, worked on a document on "the prevention of abuse of power and manipulation." and sent it to us to reflect on and contribute to. Every community is required to have a policy on the prevention of abuse of power and manipulation.

The document elicited some revealing and thought-provoking statements that touched me. One example: "What touches us very directly in our religious life is that sometimes a poor understanding of the vow of obedience has given rise to abusive situations of which we are not yet fully aware." It further says that the abuse of power in female religious institutions is considerable and some examples are coming to light.

“This power exercised in the name of authority and limits a person's freedom to make decisions about her personal life, because it is not always clear what God's will is," the document says. "An updated reflection on the vow of obedience could shed much light in this respect.”

The document proposes ways to think about potential abuse in our communities:

- The first thing is awareness of an abusive situation. Recognize it, look at it head-on and address it.
- Have a structure for listening to the alleged victims who come forward to tell their story.
- Reflect on authority, its scope, limits, and respect for the freedom of people and their conscience.
- Reflect on the power that we have as religious, as “a sister” a teacher, a counsellor, a catechist.
- Evaluate the type of relationships that exist in our pastoral centers, and identify situations of risk, unsafe spaces, and dangerous habits.
- Review the structure we have in educational pastoral centers and, if necessary, rethink the type of relationships we have established.

- Establish clear protocols, known to all, to deal with any situation that arises, any suspicions or complaints.
- Consider internal and external jurisdictions and continually evaluate their mode of interaction.

In summary, the council of our congregation said: "The Church has come to the issue of the abuse of power and conscience to the scandals of sexual abuse and that it does not even have a definition of the abuse of manipulation. Let us hope that Pope Francis, who has courageously entered into this subject, will succeed in filling this void, and will continue to push the Church along the path he has begun."

***Editor's Note**: This story was updated to correct the name of the person pictured with Lalita Beero and her husband. It is Bishop Sarat Chandra Nayak. Also corrected is the affiliation of Fr. Martin Chintamoni, who is diocesan coordinator and contact person for the synod.*