Columns
Religious Life



Worshippers pray during a Good Friday procession in Kolkata, India, April 18. (OSV News/Reuters/Avijit Ghosh)



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Consecrated people encounter immense possibilities to be available at the service of God. A consecrated persons is welcomed everywhere, most of the time — leaving aside the occasional risks. Even when clothed in secular attire, our demeanor gives away our true identity.

A few years ago, my community decided to reach out to a migrant group of workers engaged in road construction in Goa. While the parents worked, the children would play on the roadside. We spotted their residential area, and I was asked to visit it, accompanied by one of our male benefactors for safety. On the way, I prayed silently that we not encounter the supervisor, in case he denied us permission to visit them. In those days, religious could be spotted and accused of anything.

After parking our vehicle, we entered the narrow footpath leading to the huts. "Come, come, do something for them," someone called out. I was shocked to see the supervisor himself sitting in the shade — and welcoming us. It was unbelievable to find a sign of welcome where we had feared rejection. I was immensely grateful to God for opening a way to give his message.

The illiterate migrants had congregated there from neighboring states, as life was hard in their villages. They engaged in various types of work. As we visited one family after another, people would retreat into their huts at the sight of us. Still, we walked ahead in hope. Then, one woman who had been informed about the "strangers" in the area came outside. Looking at us, she said, "You are church people. You are welcome." She invited us to her hut made of plastic sheets and spread a mat on the dusty floor for us to sit.

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The cross I wore with my uniform dress was a stumbling block for some at first. But the same cross later became a welcome sign of acceptance.

Since then, we have met them regularly, spending time with the children, playing games, and providing snacks and clothes at their request.

One day we visited them with biryani — a full meal of rice with chicken. We gave packets to each hut, based on the number of members in each family. An elderly gentleman stood aside, watching us, with the packet of food in his hand. As we were

about to leave, he asked, with tears rolling down his cheeks, "Are you from Jesus?"

At that moment, I felt my mission there was accomplished. If they could recognize us as "Jesus' people," that was the greatest gift we could offer to Jesus.

Another experience while traveling on Indian railways made me realize how the public identifies us through the service we do. Traveling by train in India is not always safe or comfortable as some routes are prone to attacks by robbers.

I was en route to Kolkata one day when, in the evening, I was suddenly awakened by hushed voices: "Be careful. Robbers are around." I sat up with caution. It was getting dark outside. My seat was next to the door, and I had a bag full of gold-plated church articles under my seat. I wouldn't reach my destination until the next morning, and I was clearly preoccupied with these prized items meant for someone else.

About 9 p.m., after I had finished my dinner, two police officers arrived with a handcuffed man. They chained him to the window bars opposite my seat and sat nearby to guard him. Time ticked away; it became 10.30 p.m., and I longed to sleep. Suddenly, an inspiration flashed through my mind. I asked the officers if they could guard my luggage, too. They readily agreed, and I climbed to the top berth to sleep without fear.

I woke up about 5 a.m. and was preparing to alight when I overheard the conversation between the police officers. "She is like Mother Teresa," one said. "At the service of poor people. They serve in hospitals, schools ..." I realized they were speaking about me. I remained still, pretending to be asleep.

What a relief! I felt on top of the world, lying on the top berth of the Kolkata-bound Howrah Mail.

The world knows religious through the humanitarian services we do. We all serve Jesus through our apostolic activities, each according to our charism, and we reveal Jesus through our life and work. The world recognizes that we are set apart for God — and we serve God's people.

It is fitting to recall the words of Fr. Henry Falcao, director of St Joseph Vaz Spiritual Renewal Centre in Goa, on the occasion of the Jubilee of Consecrated life celebrated Feb. 2 at Our Lady of Fatima Shrine in Panjim:

> It is a wonderful moment today to recall how faithful we have been to God. It is God who consecrates; we are only instruments in his hands. We are reminded to stay faithful to the covenant made with God, and to be true to the charisms of our Founders. Each congregation is blessed with their unique charism, and that is the beauty of the church.

During his reflection, Falcao encouraged introspection and said that those who have left everything for God have to ask ourselves if we have given our best to God, and thus have become a blessing to the world. He said that God has been blessing us that we may become a blessing to others — that the world may receive hope through us.

The concluding words of his reflection resound in my heart:

> Consecrated persons are called to radiate the light of Christ to the world through our practice of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience. Every consecrated person has to be filled with the Holy Spirit, because we have to carry out our God-given mission through the Holy Spirit.

May we have the courage to take risks and stand by the poor. May we be Christ-bearers in our time.