

The First Catholic Priest in India to Become a Lawyer to Fight for the Downtrodden People.

Becoming a catholic priest is regarded as a call from God for a higher purpose. There is a general belief that God calls only special people for priesthood, and once the call is accepted, it is the Holy Spirit who guides the rest of the life. In the eyes of the world, priesthood is a special sacrifice that is limited to spirituality and frugality. But serving the spiritual needs of God's people and at the same time fighting against the evils of corruption and injustice, as a charity, needs extraordinary talent, dedication and additional sacrifices. Therefore, Fr. P.D Mathew's life is full of challenges and sacrifices, in his relentless efforts to fight corruption and injustice; to protect the weaker sections of the community. Born and brought up in Kerala, Fr. Mathew's native place is Changanassery in Kottayam District. By balancing dual responsibilities as a priest and lawyer, his vocation is a great model for the world, and an inspiration for all Indians, especially Malayalees, seeking truth and justice.

Fr. P. D. Mathew, S. J. is the first Catholic Priest in India to become a lawyer. It is ideal to say that God's spirit forced him to become a lawyer, to be the voice of the oppressed. In the Old Testament of Bible we read about some lawyers specially selected by god to fight for the oppressed. These men were later called prophets. They were also led by the same spirit that is leading Fr.Mathew.

Fr. Mathew recently celebrated the Golden Jubilee of his religious life as a Jesuit priest. His priesthood has been filled with stories of empowering thousands of Indian citizens through his mission of legal aid.



**Fr. Mathew Celebrating Holy Mass at his ordination ceremony 50 years ago.
MAY 29, 1976**

When asked why he took up this risky vocation, he narrated his early years of priesthood.

"During my Jesuit formation I was asked to pursue studies in chemistry in view of teaching in our college at Ahmedabad. Meanwhile, during the period 1962 - 65, I had an opportunity to stay with a group of tribal bonded laborers in the district of Bharuch in Gujarat. The interaction with them helped to realize the way they were oppressed by powerful elements in their society and their cries for human rights and justice challenged me as a priest to respond to them in an effective way".

Listening to the sorrows of the suffering, and offering prayers with hope is the usual solution prescribed by priests. In Fr. Mathew's mind the sorrows of the suffering people ignited thoughts to offer prayers with action, firming up his mind for real solutions, not just hope.

Fr. Mathew recollects his decision to pursue law. "It was in that situation that I first thought of studying law in order to liberate them from the bonded system prevalent at that time in Gujarat. My later studies in social work at the M.S. University, Baroda, (passed with distinction and gold medal) also inspired me to take up the legal profession as a means of liberating the oppressed people. But this idea of mine was not appreciated by my Jesuit superiors & companions as they considered it as a liar's profession used by lawyers to exploit the poor litigants helplessly struggling to seek justice through courts established by the foreign rulers. As a result, no priest in India ever thought of studying civil laws to take up the legal profession as a mission to serve the poor."

He narrated the obstructions and struggles he had to go through when he decided to learn law and fight professionally for the weaker citizens in an area where Christianity is often threatened and subjected to abuse.

"Consequently I struggled a lot to get permission from my Superiors to acquire a degree in law. After a year-long dialogue with my superiors I was given permission to take a degree in law at the M.S. University, Baroda. After 3 years of law studies I got the LL.B. degree with distinction and gold medal which prompted the university authorities to ask me to continue my law studies to take an LL.M. degree and to teach in the Law Faculty of the University. But it was not my portion...."

"It was at this juncture the thought of those bonded laborers whose cries I had heard years ago in the rural areas of Bharuch came reverberating to my life as a challenge. It encouraged me to live among the poor tribal people, and to teach them about their legal rights and organize them to fight for their rights and justice and to empower them to lead a dignified life as human beings and citizens of India. When I was about to plunge into this new adventurous way of Jesuit life and priestly profession, I was asked by my Jesuit Provincial Superior of India to go to Delhi, the capital of India, and to start legal aid as a part of the social work of the Indian Social Institute at Delhi, administered by my religious congregation - the 'Society of Jesus' - in India.

"First I spent two months at different places in India to understand the socio-economic and legal problems faced by the poor people and the views of social activists working among them. This study-tour gave me deeper insight about the struggle of the poor to get socio-economic and political justice and to experience equality, liberty, human dignity, fraternity (common brotherhood and sisterhood) and unity assured by the Constitution of India to every Indian citizen. What I saw was a divided India - rich and poor. Majority of Indians belonged to the weaker sections of the society that consists of women, children, senior citizens, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, minorities, unorganized laborers, under-trials. They all were denied justice and experience of human rights. Their dream of an independent and progressive India was never going to be a reality. It remained a mere dream."

"The above experiences and socio -legal analysis encouraged me to take up the legal aid at the national level. Immediately after returning to Delhi, I registered my name in the Bar Council of Delhi as a lawyer and joined the Supreme Court Bar Association to practice law to support the poor clients. Many socially committed judges and lawyers expressed their willingness to help me in taking up Public Interest Litigation (PIL) on behalf of the poor. Later with their help I fought several PIL cases related to bonded laborers, child laborers and victims of atrocities in the Supreme Court and many received justice through landmark judgements."

"While defending those cases in Supreme Court I realized that the poor were not able to get their rights and legal justice because of ignorance of their rights assured by the Constitution of India and the laws of the country and lack of organizational frame work to support the poor seeking justice."

"Later a 'Legal Cell' was established in the Indian Social Institute to empower the oppressed. Under this program were initiated several activities such as legal literacy, Para-legal training, publication of leaflets, booklets and magazines in English and state languages. Legal counselling and people's court (Lok Adalat) helped the parties of disputes to settle their cases amicably. Such cases were followed up with family visits, dialogue, etc. by our legal aid team members. Now such legal aid cells are working in many parts of the country. They are directed by priests, religious and lay leaders well trained in law. At present about 1000 priests and religious workers have taken up the legal profession to promote justice and human rights among the weaker sections of society, especially among women, children, minorities, disabled and prisoners, SCs/STs."



Fr. P. D. Mathew believes that virtue lies not only in finding the way but to walk the path successfully. He leveraged his priestly skills in bringing a harmony between parties in the legal settlements he initiated through the court system.

"What we need is well trained and committed socio -legal activists to promote the values of justice, equality, liberty, fraternity and human dignity in every aspect of national life especially in the legal and judicial systems. There must be a new generation of lawyers to open the eyes of the poor to see the wonders of the law. In view of these great tasks ahead, priests, religious and social activists and lay leaders are trained in law for an year to become Para-legal expert so that they can teach the illiterates and the ignorant ones about the laws of our country and thereby promote justice and human rights among them, and empower them to affirm and assert their rights using the available judicial means."

"If everyone follows the laws of our country all persons irrespective of caste, creed, race, gender and place of birth will entail a meaningful co-existence because no one can love others without respecting their rights, which are given to every person as a means to develop him/her as a human person and child of God. Keeping the above vision, philosophy and spirituality in mind I am moving as a Jesuit lawyer to help the voiceless millions in India in collaboration with like-minded lawyers, legal and social activists."

The legal aid activities now carried forward in Nyay Darshan, a Centre for Human Rights and Justice at Vadodara, Gujarat, are designed to make the legal aid services a powerful tool to promote justice and human rights among the least of God's children. The center is engaged : (1) to promote legal literacy through schools, colleges, boarding's and other educational institutions, (2) to organize talks, discussions, seminars and workshops on legal issues affecting the poor, (3) to impart legal counselling to clients and to settle cases amicably, (4) to publish periodicals viz. leaflets and booklets on various rights of the common people, (5) to make people aware of the various welfare schemes and the free legal aid schemes initiated by the Central and State Governments, (6) to train social activists on various laws and welfare schemes, (7) to file litigation in different courts on behalf of the marginalized whose rights are violated.



Over 100 books including the Constitution of India (simplified), Indian Penal Code, Indian Evidence Act, hundreds of leaflets in Hindi and English on different areas of Human rights and Legal literacy for the common people have been published from the Nyaya Darshan. The magazines 'Legal News and Views' and 'Aapna Adhikaar' are lucid channels of enlightenment to the common man and the social activists. Nyay Darshan has also started training programs of different durations which are held at different places to train Social Activists. Personal counselling is given to clients who come for settlement of cases at the Lok Adalat. This service is open to all people. The one-year Para Legal training program is yet another fruitful mission of

Nyay Darshan. There are already two batches and a third batch will be at 3 places viz. Quilon, Andheri (Mumbai) and Vadodara meant for social activists who work among the weaker sections.

These activities are conducted in collaboration with other NGOs, legal activists and lawyers engaged in promoting Human Rights.

The Centre is also engaged in building up Lawyers Solidarity towards the cause of human rights and for addressing various social realities which involve a holistic approach.

One of the ambitious mass media projects is that of intellectualization of the people on the law and the various government schemes available to them at large through village-to-village street plays comprising one- act plays, music and other means of public shows which will also help on-the-spot counselling to the needy and deprived ones.

"The last 30 years of experience in this service has given me a great sense of satisfaction and joy as a Jesuit lawyer. The words of Jesus 'Happy are those who hunger and thirst for justice (righteousness) and they shall be satisfied,' are being experienced in my life too. Now I do believe that legal professionals with a socio - spiritual vision and mission can become catalysts to establish a New Bharat based on the values enshrined in the Constitution of India".

A positive attitude causes a chain reaction of positive thoughts, events and outcomes. It is a catalyst... a spark that creates extra-ordinary results. The fight of Fr. P D Mathew continues as a hope to the poor and the downtrodden; as a light at the end of the tunnel for many who pass through the legal turmoil; a source of knowledge to those who are illiterate and ignorant in their fight for justice.
