

## **THE KHRISTSEVIKAS IN INDIA**

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January 2006

The Foundation of the Khristsevikas of the Union of the Catholic Apostolate, a Secular Institute for women draws its inspiration from the charism of St. Vincent Pallotti.

The origin of the Institute dates back to the late 1950's when there was a great need felt for sisters to work in the Raipur mission, started by the Pallottines, to compliment the work of the priests. Initially the idea came from Fr. Bryan Tiernan, the Australian Pallottine who, at that time, was working at St. Joseph's church Raipur. Fr. John Weidner who arrived in Raipur around this time also was enthusiastic about the proposals of Fr. Tiernan. Pooling their ideas together and with the help of Fr. Ansgar Faller, who was at that time working in the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes Vatican, and Msgr. Jos A. E. Fernandez, Director of the Pontifical Missions in India, they gradually gave shape to the idea of a Secular Institute, with the vision and ideas of St. Vincent Pallotti.

In 1960, the first members Joyce Almeida, Isabella Almeida, and in 1961, Crescy John, Rita Roy, Majorie D'Souza and others were sent to "Regina Mundi Institute" in Rome, to study Theology. Fr. Faller also secured for them a house, "Il Nido" (The Nest) for their residence near the Vatican Museum. Fr. John S. Gaynor was their Spiritual Director during their time in Rome. In the meantime, Fr. Faller had contacted the Hildegardisisters of the Catholic Apostolate, (which was founded by Fr. Adolf Panzer SAC in 1921 in Germany, who were dedicated to Family Apostolate). Also the Theresiensisters of the Catholic Apostolate were contacted (founded by Fr. Josef Frank SAC for the purpose of charity, care for the sick, education of children, direction of children's home etc. in Germany). These two formed a federation at the request of Fr. Faller in order to give shape to the new Indian group. These agreed to see to the financial support and formation of the Indian women (recruited by Msgr. Fernandez) while in Rome and later, four years in all. Fr. Faller also contacted Fr. Werner Hunold SAC for he was in the Indian mission, at that time.

Having completed three year course on Sacred Sciences in 1963, five of them began their spiritual year at the Mother house of the Sisters of St. Hildegard, at Hildenbandseck- Neustadt, Germany. During their period of studies Fr. John Weidner SAC visited them and later kept in touch with the Indian group that was getting prepared. Fr. Lorenz Scheu SAC, who had earlier returned from the Pallottine mission in India, was their Spiritual Director during their spiritual year. Sr. Radegundis of the Hildegardisisters, was appointed as their formator. On September 17, 1964 four of them, Crescy John, Joyce Almeida, Isabella Almeida and Rita Roy, took their First Promises and returned to India soon after. On January 15, 1965 they arrived in Raipur mission to start their mission under the guidance of Msgr. John Weidner. They put down roots and established themselves. They took the name of Khristsevikas (Servants of Christ) for their Institute. The Centre of their Institute was the Khristsevika Bhawan at Raipur, M.P. Ms. Crescy John was appointed its first President.

The little group started growing in spite of many odds and some young women found their way to this Institute. The idea of secular consecration was very new, in fact it is still not fully understood here. Ms. Joyce Almeida was appointed as the first Formator. Soon members started working in other parts of the country. In the mean time the Constitution too was drawn up for the Institute, drafted and written by Crescy John and Joyce Almeida with the help of spiritual experts and theologians. The Rector General of the Pallottines, Rev. Fr. Ludwig Münz, through his letter dated December 22, 1977, formally admitted the Khristsevikas into the Union of the Catholic Apostolate.

The members after further education and formal training started to serve the Indian Church through their involvement in the various national and regional Centres and organizations of the Church, through social work, non-formal education of women etc. They lived like any other lay person going through the struggles of day to day life, but this did not stop the members from sowing seeds of witness wherever they have worked.

As the years passed by, the need was felt to shift the Centre of the Institute to another place which would be more central and accessible for the growth of the members in spiritual and in other fields too. Thus after an intense process of prayer and discernment, it was decided to shift their Centre to Poona.

In 1980, the Centre was shifted to Poona, the house called "Vardan" (blessings) but members continued to work in various places of their choice. Hence they served in Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar. In our efforts to live our commitment in a secular form and in keeping with the vision and inspiration of St. Vincent Pallotti, we have tried and have been open to diverse forms of Apostolate. To be effective witness, each one had to develop her charism and abilities as best as she could. Some of the areas in which members were and are involved are: social work in rural areas and urban slums, non-formal education and empowerment of women and girls, working women's hostel and women's issues, care of children from broken homes, agriculture and diary farming, teaching, nursing, secretarial and catechetical work, Christian art, Leprosy rehabilitation, student counselor and christian journalism. Our services have also been rendered substantially to the cause of the Secular Institutes and Lay Societies of India and also Asia.

Khristsevikas have served on National and other Centres and Organizations for example NVSC (National Vocation Service Centre) in Pune, NBCLC (National, Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre) in Bangalore, Ishvani Kendra (missiological Institute) in Pune, INSCAP - Christian Art for Peace, Diocesan Catechetical Board, ICPA (Indian Catholic Press Association), SAR News (South Asian Religious News), EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of the third world Theologians) Women theologian's group and CCBI (Conference of Catholic Bishops of India).

We have maintained good relations with the past Rector Generals who have taken a keen interest in our growth. We have maintained the same with the present Rector General Fr. Fritz Kretz too. This was through correspondence and through occasional visits from both sides. Cordial relations have also been maintained with the Hildegardisisters and with the Theresiensisters by way of regular correspondence and occasional visits from both sides which has maintained our mutual bond.

We have good relation with the Pallottine fathers and with both the Pallottine sisters' groups in India. Having regular UAC meetings is also helping us to improve our relations. We, the Khristsevikas make it a point to invite the Pallottine Provincial or a Pallottine Father to be an observer for our General Assembly. Occasionally we invite one of them for our Retreat / Seminar.

At present we have a membership of nine women from different parts of the country, among them seven are finally professed while two are temporarily professed. A few young women are in touch with us. The National and Secular character of the Institute is maintained all along. Members meet biannually for Retreats and other Institute meetings. Currently Ms. A. Regina Silvia is the President of the Khristsevikas. Former Presidents were Ms. Joyce Almeida, Ms. Shanti Joseph and Ms. Crescy John.

The Khristsevikas believe that the vision of St. Vincent Pallotti is truly one of promising and empowering the Laity in the Church. We are awaiting the approval for want of a required number of members. We are hopeful that this will happen in the near future.

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**SOMMARIO** della presentazione di Ms. A. Regina Silvia e Ms. Joyce Almeida: *Le Khristsevikas in India.*

L'origine dell'Istituto risale alla fine degli anni Cinquanta quando si sentì l'esigenza che le suore lavorassero nella missione pallottina di Raipur. L'idea iniziale si deve a don Bryan Tiernan, un Pallottino australiano che lavorava nella chiesa di St. Joseph a Raipur, condivisa anche da don John Weidner che giunse in India in quel periodo. Essi con l'aiuto di don Ansgar Faller e Mons. Jos A. E. Fernandez iniziarono a dar vita ad un Istituto Secolare ispirato alle idee ed alla visione di san Vincenzo Pallotti.

Nel 1960 Joyce Almeida, Isabella Almeida e nel 1961 Crescy John, Rita Roy, Majorie D'Souza furono inviate a studiare a Roma, presso l'Istituto "Regina Mundi". Don Faller aveva procurato per loro una residenza nei pressi del Vaticano chiamata "Il Nido" ed aveva contattato le Suore di S. Ildegarda e quelle di S. Teresa affinché fossero di sostegno al nuovo gruppo di donne indiane.

Nel 1963, dopo aver completato gli studi, cinque di esse furono inviate presso la casa madre delle Suore di S. Ildegarda a Hildenbandseck-Neustadt. Un anno dopo, precisamente il 17 settembre 1964, Crescy John, Joyce Almeida, Isabella Almeida e Rita Roy fecero la professione e ritornarono in India. Il 15 gennaio 1965 iniziarono il loro lavoro missionario sotto la guida di Mons. John Weidner. L'Istituto prese il nome di Khristsevikas (Serve di Cristo) con sede presso il Khristsevika Bhawan di Raipur. Crescy John fu nominata prima Presidente.

L'idea dell'Istituto Secolare era nuova ed ha trovato numerose adesioni in India. Il piccolo gruppo, nonostante varie difficoltà, iniziò a crescere. Crescy John e Joyce Almeida, con l'aiuto di esperti e teologi, elaborarono le prime Costituzioni. Con la lettera del 22 dicembre 1977 il Rettore generale della Società dell'Apostolato Cattolico, Ludwig Münz, dichiarava l'aggregazione dell'Istituto all'Unione dell'Apostolato Cattolico.

Con il passare degli anni nacque l'esigenza di spostare la sede dell'Istituto in una zona più centrale ed accessibile a tutti i membri. Fu così che nel 1980 il Centro fu spostato a Poona, anche se i membri continuavano a prestare - e prestano ancora oggi - la loro opera in vari luoghi come Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar.

Seguendo l'ispirazione di san Vincenzo Pallotti le Khristsevikas svolgono il loro apostolato in vari campi: lavori sociali in zone rurali e periferie delle città, formazione delle donne e delle ragazze, collaborazione nelle case di accoglienza per le donne, cura dei bambini delle famiglie in difficoltà, lavoro negli ospedali, insegnamento del catechismo, promozione dell'arte cristiana, riabilitazione dei lebbrosi, consulenze e giornalismo cristiano.

Attualmente l'Istituto è formato da nove membri provenienti da varie zone dell'India. Tra questi sette hanno fatto la consacrazione perpetua e due quella temporanea. Il carattere secolare delle Khristsevikas è vivo ancora oggi. I membri, che si incontrano due volte all'anno per ritiri o incontri, promuovono la visione di san Vincenzo Pallotti sulla partecipazione attiva dei laici nella Chiesa. L'Istituto cerca nuove vie per incrementare il numero dei membri e sviluppare nuovi campi di apostolato al servizio della Chiesa in India.

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