



Apporto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice all'educazione (1872-2022)

PERCORSI, SFIDE E PROSPETTIVE

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SUOR NANCY PEREIRA (1923 - 2010)

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Sr. Nancy Pereira, the first Daughter of Mary Help of Christian (FMA) from Kerala, in South India, was born on 14 August 1923 in Pudukkurichy in the coastal region of Trivandrum, Kerala, as the youngest of five children, to Marian Pereira and Agnes Pereira, who were actively involved in parish activities and in the service of the poor. Raised up in a Catholic family environment and studied in the Institution run by the Carmelite Sisters, she was motivated to become a religious. Encountering one of the FMA aspirants, Juliana Fernandes, who later became Sr. Helen Fernandes, the first Indian Provincial, Nancy was inspired to become a Salesian Sister. Thus, in 1942 she went to Broadway, Madras, to begin her formative journey in St. Thomas the Apostle province (INM). Nancy made her first profession on 6 January 1945 and her final after 3 years.

She was assigned with various responsibilities, like assistant of the boarders, student, caterer, bursar, teacher, architect, social worker, animator of the community etc. One of her exceptional talents was the architectural and designing skills, which she put forth in constructing certain parts of the buildings in various centres. Another area of her dedicated mission was in the social ministry, which she implemented in the Beatitudes Welfare Centre in Vyasarpadi, Madras, in collaboration with the Salesian Fathers. Subsequently after the inception of the Sacred Heart Province, Bangalore (INK) bifurcated from INM, she was fully involved in the uplift of the slum in Ulsoor, Bangalore by organizing a maxi project called FIDES (Family Integrated Development Education Scheme), which is her brain child. After an intense service of 65 years as religious, she took flight to her heavenly abode on 14 July 2010.

Sr. Nancy is a well known figure in the slums of Vysarpadi in Madras and Ulsoor in Bangalore for the enormous enterprising works that she carried out in uplifting the poor, especially the women, due to which she is familiarly recognized by others with different designations: like Indefatigable Entrepreneur, Heroine of India's untouchables, Sister of the Bank of the poor or Sister Banker, Architect of Women's Development, Mother Teresa of South India etc. She inherited this empathy for the poor right from her younger age from her parents, which made a strong impact on her as she grew up. At her first meeting with Sr. Helen Fernandez she asked her, "What do the Salesian Sisters do?" Her reply, "They stay with the poor", was the basic motivating force in her to become a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians.



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Thus she herself stated once that her vocation is for the poor. Whatever might have been the responsibility entrusted to Sr. Nancy, her love was always for the poor. She spent her entire life working for their empowerment and welfare through social service, teaching catechism, educating the children, conducting oratories, distributing food, taking care of them etc.

All her enterprising works drew their inspiration from her spouse, Jesus, during her intense moments with Him invariably everyday for two hours. Added to this, she paid a keen attention to the reality with an educational and evangelical outlook. Thus, she helped some lay people, particularly the workers who collaborated with her, by building houses for them. She started various projects to empower the poor women. In 1977 when she arrived at the Beatitude Centre, Vyasarpadi, she realized that the infant mortality rate was very high. She started a programme called the "Mother and Child Program", which she renamed it as Nutrition Education Programme, with the aim of "educating the mothers of neighbouring slums in health, hygiene and home care." She taught them some artistic skills and handicrafts with which they could earn a living and feed their children. Subsequently, in 1993, with the founding of FIDES, she transformed the lives of many people with the aim of educating young women, because she believed that if a woman was educated, the whole family would be educated.

The main intention of Sr. Nancy in initiating the project FIDES was to alleviate the problems of the unfortunate and undernourished women and children, to awaken in them the sense of dignity, to make them self-sufficient and to teach them to save their earnings for the future. In order to realize these objectives, with the help of volunteers she used to frequently organize various awareness programs and activities in the slums and in the villages, like: health awareness programmes, natural family planning, HIV/AIDS, literacy, women's rights, legal education, effects of alcoholism through Alcoholic Anonymous Group (AAG), Nutrition Education Program (NEP), frequent general medical and immunization camps, training in income generating programs (IGP), evening tuitions, back to school program, leadership training, Educational sponsorship programs, running a crèche, Self Help Groups (SHG), youth meets, food preservation classes, religious instruction, mid-day meals for the crèche children, elderly and sick people, and so on.

Apart from this, the innovative idea introduced by Sr. Nancy in the slum and villages was the saving schemes. She motivated the women to save Re. 1 or 2 everyday, which were collected by the FIDES staff and brought to their Office. At the end of every month or year, the saved amount was returned to the person concerned. Gradually, she set up a bank for the poor following the method of the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, which offered loans up to Rs. 5000 at an interest rate of only 2%, which the poor people did not find difficult to repay. In this way they could get loans to set up their own shops, buy a small piece of land to grow vegetables or start a business. By this they learnt to refrain from being spendthrift and to save the money to meet their necessary future expenses.

Witnessing these enormous works of Sr. Nancy, one may question: Did she ever face any opposition in carrying out these works? Of course she did. Initially in the areas of her mission centre, diseases were very common. The place was so filthy that one could not even walk through the narrow streets without the stench adhering to the clothes. Addiction to alcohol and drugs was

nothing new. Unemployment was widespread. Women were not able to exercise their right of living a peaceful life due to their drunken husbands. Moreover, her first experience in the slum, especially in Ulsoor, was very disheartening. Some people abused her verbally and others were indifferent; one drunkard flung a drum at her, still others rejected her; some others closed their doors on her face. Till the arrival of Sr. Nancy no other social worker dared to carry on their work in this place. At Vyasarpadi too, there was a lot of opposition from the part of the politicians and the local leaders who attempted to kill her. In all these situations, Sr. Nancy did not lose hope but constantly persevered with tenacity with the sole aim of empowering the poor people.

Looking at her life and ministry, one could testify that she clearly embodied the identity of the Institute: 'the education of young people of the working class, especially the poorest, with the spirit of the *da mihi animas cetera tolle*.' Through every initiative or programme that she animated, she taught the poor, especially the women, to live a dignified life, to take care of themselves and their families and to maintain hygiene. Aiming at the integral education of the poor people, she also encouraged and trained the staff to make education the basic objective. Her educational goal was to make people self-sufficient through self-employment skills, in order to generate income for the family and save a certain amount for the future. So she used to say repeatedly: "The real charity is to make them self-sufficient."

An evangelical characteristic of the Preventive System cited in the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians is: "patient charity that excuses all, trusts all, bears with all, and never loses hope." As quoted above, Sr. Nancy confronted many difficulties in promoting women's rights. Yet, without losing hope, she won the hearts of her opponents through love and optimism. Precisely, this optimistic attitude kept her cheerful always, which is one of the characteristics of Salesian charism, so much so that those who saw her describe her as a cheerful, energetic and iron lady.

The charity of Sr. Nancy embraces everyone without any discrimination. She said, "I did all I could, [staying] together with them for the whole day and dispelling their uneasiness of belonging to an oppressed class". Her work did not have any confinement regarding religion, caste or language. Though her focus was on women, she reached out to everyone, including the young people and men. She built up good rapport with the rich people too, who generously offered help in her mission. Not only from abroad, but Sr. Nancy used to get help from local benefactors too. She mobilized funds with the help of her collaborators, like the director of DELL and other Software Companies. One of the objectives of her project was to create solidarity by providing equal opportunities for both men and women, thus creating a fraternal society.

The fruit of her work is seen in the development of the slums and the villages, and the life of numerous people who benefitted from her service and training. Almost all the women in these places reminisce with gratitude that they have become confident to face a crowd, have become self-sufficient and knew how to manage their families. There are many who are well educated and holding a high position in the society as doctors, engineers and professionals.

In recognition and appreciation for her works, she was accorded with many awards, both local as well as international: a certificate of acknowledgment by the Karnataka Government; 'Golden

Apple' from the Foundation "Marisa Bellisario"; Mimosa d'oro award from Blue Drops Group of Naples, Italy, who also declared her as "Woman of the Year"; "Mandir della Pace" prize at Assisi, Italy; Talemone award at Padua, Italy Messenger of St. Antony's International award from Padua, Italy and Bronze award from St. Antony's International Association.

Thanks to Sr. Nancy who through her educative method transformed the lives of many people.