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Faith, Adorable Admiration and a Catholic Woman's Seminary & Convent Life

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Sister Jesme is the autobiographer. She was born in the year 1956 in the South Indian state (province) of Kerala. At an early young age of around seventeen onwards, she started to had her formal association with the congregation of 'Mother of Carmel', i.e., from the year 1974. Mother of Carmel congregation is one of the most popular and well recognized Catholic monastery seminarian and convent way of a patterned spiritual society.

This work primarily got first published in the autobiographer's mother-tongue 'Malayalam', though she composed this work in English. She intentionally preferred this work to get published in Malayalam, first and then in English. Through this work, she aspires to present a 'vivid inside view' of the Catholic way of life, primarily in the South Indian Kerala state and wishes to see 'Catholic Church's reformation', i.e., mainly seminarian and associated monastery lifestyles and patterns.

The work focuses and draws the attention of the readers through five chapters, primarily. There are two more important sections, namely, 'Escape in Disguise: Prologue' and 'Afterword: The Divine Majority'. Sister Jesme's writing and narration style engage the readers in a through flow, as she keeps revealing her new primary impressions about Catholic way of life, admiration towards Catholic mode of spirituality, pragmatic seminary life encounters, inescapable hidden blemish grey shades of convent life, etc.

I

As part of Sister Jesme's seminarian and convent life at the Mother of Carmel congregation; she was associated with the higher education domain as an English Literature faculty and as an educational administrator too, by holding positions like Principal and Vice-Principal at various points of time. Academically she completed her higher education in English Literature discipline by successfully acquiring M.Phil., and Ph.D., degrees, based on the granted permission and promotion of her congregation.

Though she was highly qualified academically and professionally held a few essential positions within her congregation and educational institutions, she was unsatisfied with her seminarian and convent life, primarily due to 'adjustment problems' with other co-seminarians, etc. As a result, at last, she ended her congregational association and her associated professional educational roles in August 2008. She tendered retirement voluntarily to her professional teaching role also. Later on, she composed this autobiography.

All this indicates that she continued her association with the Mother of Carmel congregation for about thirty-three years, despite having ‘dissatisfaction’. She entered into seminarian life at the age of seventeen and ended the same association at the age of fifty-four years. During this duration, she associated with the Catholic way of life during her ‘prime life period’. This involved ‘prime life duration’ of Sister Jesme makes this work a significant testimony.

Though she had bitter unsatisfied experience with the Kerala Catholic Church in general and the Mother of Carmel congregation in particular, she declared her steadfast benevolence towards Christian (Catholic) faith, throughout. Same time, she also equally recognizes her foes and friends with clear distinction at various levels like within the Mother of Carmel congregation, Kerala Catholic church, etc. Thus, this indicates that she was not too blind enough to declare her anti-stands against the Mother of Carmel congregation or/and Kerala Catholic Church, etc. At some other level, she states her Christian faith-based forgiveness against her foes; same time, she was also pragmatic enough to distance herself permanently from the vicious zone of her seminarian and convent life.

II

Sister Jesme was born into an ardent Catholic family, yet her family had great exposure to ‘materialistic way’ of life too. The autobiographer distinguishes this ‘materialistic way of life’ from ‘Catholic spiritual way of life’ of her family in her childhood, by drawing a few instances like her and her family member’s lifestyles.

Sister Jesme had her happy childhood. But, since her college days onwards her family started facing financial problems; yet she was able to continue her studies. Since her college life onwards, she developed intense admiration towards seminarian way of lifestyle by becoming a nun. First, her mother and later-on her family members oppose this idea and inclination. Anyhow, she successfully enters into seminarian life by convincing her family and associates with the congregation, Mother of Carmel.

Though she had a Catholic way of life since childhood, she was quite unaware of inside seminary and convent lifestyles. Even most of the Catholics are unaware of the inside dimensions of seminary and convent lives. A kind of admiration and adoration prevails among Catholic devotees towards seminary and convent life leading priests and sisters. Even Sister Jesme and her family too had such an impression towards Catholic seminary and convent leading priests and sisters, to some extent. This admiration and adoration towards priests, sisters and Catholicism should be understood from the perspective of devotees’ spiritual inclination, on an idealistic and religious fear basis.

It was only after formal association with the Mother of Carmel congregation Sister Jesme comes to know about practical difficulties involved in choosing and leading this way of life. Anyhow, she was successful for about thirty-three years of her associated seminarian and convent life, by adjusting based on her faith.

III

This work should be seen and understood in two parts, concerning Sister Jesme; first, life as a seminarian and second as an academician at a higher educational institution administered by the Mother of Carmel congregation. And, how and why these two roles in Sister Jesme’s life were intersecting? As per this work’s narration, Sister Jesme had a kind of dissatisfaction first with the seminarian life, as her expected idealistic way of life was not prevalent in the monastery’s shared experience. Even then, she continued her monastery life with other co-sisters, including with higher superior sisters. In her first part of experience as a seminarian, even though she tried to be diplomatic by recognizing unexpected contrary prevalent grey shades in seminarian life, she adjusted and at

times escaped a few uncomfortable situations also. On a few occasions, she even had inescapable times too.

Sister Jesme primarily had two roles; one associated with the Convent and another most significant one as an associated academician with her congregation's administered higher educational institutions. Her second associated and assigned role and task as an academician of a higher educational institution maintained and administered by her congregation intensifies her dissatisfaction. While discharging this second prominent academician and educational administrator roles as Vice-Principal and Principal, she encountered stiff, at times unexpressed resentment from her religious congregation's higher officials. As a result of intensified conflict, in both recognizable and unrecognizable (same time in both expressible and un-expressible) modes by Sister Jesme, she finally decides to end her monastery life, by permanently disassociating from the Mother of Carmel congregation!

As per Sister Jesme's observation, she was disliked by a few Convent superiors and other co-sisters due to her pro-active role as Principal of the College while initiating a few positive reformatory measures towards their educational institution's betterment, prestige and standards promotion and protection. But, such a role was disliked by others; as a result, as per Sister Jesme, the Convent higher authorities and others attempted to belittle her role and prospects in the educational institution's administration.

Towards this end, as per Sister Jesme's suspicion and revelation, the congregation higher officials and others started to brand her as facing some mental health problems and attempted to present her wrong medication!! As a result of this attempted dubious unspiritual and inhuman role by her congregation's superiors and co-seminarians; she felt highly uncomfortable to continue 'shared convent' life. As a final resort, she quits Mother of Carmel congregation and ends her associated academician role too.

IV

At another level, this autobiography presents a vivid picture of Sister Jesme's continued association with her family since her difficult times start with her congregation. Though it appears that her family was supportive of her in the initial period, later-on she recognizes practical problems in seeking their support. Especially Jesme's mother was all sympathetic, concerned and always supportive; yet, Jesme had some possible difficulties in getting full-fledged support from her other extended family members and in-laws. Thus, she becomes handicapped in two ways, i.e., from her congregation and family. Even then, she was able to survive, escape and establish her own independent life in due course of time, by disassociating from her congregation and family.

If anyone wishes to engage with this work much more seriously, then a few dimensions may emerge to the forefront to ponder over. This whole autobiography brings to the fore a few questions about the Catholic way of life, such as; what should be the ideal way for conducting, organizing and managing Catholic seminaries, convents and institutions? How the superiors or spiritual leaders and authorities should lead and behave with their juniors/subordinates and command accordingly in a seminarian life? Who is superior in a monastery's life – is that God's command, voice, and inner calling or superior authorities command? Was Sister Jesme not able to adjust with the changing circumstances and accordingly initiated measures by her congregation concerning educational institutions management? What kind of phases can be drawn and constructed from Sister Jesme's autobiography? Under what kind of circumstances Sister Jesme was spiritual, diplomatic, idealistic, assertive and pragmatic?

Conclusion

This work would be interesting to all those who wish to have, first seminarian life; to know practical problems involved in such an admired idealistic life pattern. Secondly, this work would be useful to know the grey shades of Catholic seminarian and convent lifestyles. At last, this work can be positively seen and understood to initiate any required measures for the reformation of Catholic seminaries and convents.

This work would be useful to both lay readers and specializing scholars on Christianity, as a primary source of contribution was presented by a distinguished high profile academician and spiritual nun. The whole work well qualifies to be called and recognize as a full-fledged autobiography as substantial life duration was well presented and narrated, primarily concerning the Catholic monastery way of lifestyle, and subsequently evolved and faced inter-related dimensions.