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Several of the signatories of the petition to Mumbai Cardinal Oswald Gracias stand together in front of a statue of Pope John Paul II near Mumbai's Holy Name Cathedral March 8. The author of the commentary is third from the left. Virginia Saldanha is second from the left. (Photo courtesy of Astrid Lobo Gajiwala/ Catholic Women's Council)

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Cardinal Oswald Gracias' recent NCR interview has not gone down well with Indian Catholic women.

While it is refreshing to hear the archbishop of Bombay, and president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, or CBCI, admit, without evasion, that there has been a bias against giving women more leadership roles in the church, and that it is time the male hierarchy "shed this prejudice," it is also disconcerting to learn that he is a *recent* convert to the cause of women.

For Indian women who have been advocating for women's rights in the church since the 1980s, the cardinal's comment seems like a denial of all their efforts, and raises serious doubts about their credibility.

How is it possible for someone who is a member of a bishops' conference that instituted a women's commission in 1992, and is the only conference in the universal church to issue a gender policy, way back in 2010, to claim to become convinced only in 2019, about the need for women's leadership?



Cardinal Oswald Gracias of Mumbai, president of Catholic Bishops Conference of India, speaks during a news conference in 2018 in Bangalore. (CNS/Anto Akkara)

In Gracias' own archdiocese, the autonomous, Catholic feminist collective *Satyashodhak* ("Seekers of truth"), has unceasingly asked for a place at the decision-making table. In 2007, its members — Salesian Sr. Philomena D'Souza, as secretary of the archdiocesan women's commission; and Sacred Heart of Jesus Sr. Ananda Amritmahal — started conducting an annual women's leadership training program under the patronage of the archbishop. The training continues through today.

Satyashodhak was born in 1984 after a consultation on the "Role of Women in Church and Society," organized by the bishops' commission for laity that same year.

For decades its members questioned the consultative nature of parish councils, and were told that the church is not a democracy but a theocracy with a divinely sanctioned male hierarchy that is entitled to make all the decisions.

We fought for women's rightful place in the washing of the feet ritual on Holy Thursday and were swept aside by "theological" arguments, until Pope Francis swept these aside; we asked for girl altar servers before they were officially permitted; we pointed out the limitations of the lectionary, and created awareness about using inclusive language, even when talking about God.

We resisted the male diaconate because it put one more layer of men above us, men who had less of a right to be ordained than the women who led liturgical services; or the women who were Eucharistic ministers, lectors and cantors; or the women who ran the Sunday school, led the small Christian communities, and did the footwork in parish councils.

We openly supported the ordination of women and the appointment of women as cardinals.

In recent times, members have been joining hands with Catholic activists across India to demand justice for survivors of clergy sexual abuse.

We believed our archbishop was listening and was converted to our cause. It is disturbing to know that he was not.



Several of the signatories of the petition to Mumbai Cardinal Oswald Gracias stand together outside Mumbai's Holy Name Cathedral March 8. The author of the commentary is third from the left. Virginia Saldanha is second from the left. (Photo courtesy of Astrid Lobo Gajiwala/Catholic Women's Council)

We are glad though, that at the global summit called by Pope Francis in February 2019 to discuss clergy sexual abuse, our cardinal realized that the women brought up aspects which were new to him. It emphasizes the need for women's voices.

"What a wealth of insights we are missing in our churches when we do not allow women a voice at the pulpit," said Marcia D'Cunha, a former two-term secretary of the archdiocesan women's commission.

"In fact," she continued, "we have actually regressed in our archdiocese. In my youth, in our parish, women were allowed to preach, especially on Women's Day. This year on March 8, the words of the priest sounded hollow. Especially when a sister-survivor is ignored and the rape accused bishop is allowed a position of privilege! The actions of the church shout louder than words."

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According to Gracias, the pope is keen that women have a greater role in decision-making in the church. But this can only happen if we bring about changes in structures and develop inclusive theologies.

Sadly, as St. Paul Sr. Pauline Chakkalakal, feminist biblical theologian, and member of *Satyashodhak*, observed: "Church leadership in general is rather hesitant to bring about structural changes. The institutional church would do well to retrieve the teachings and praxis of Jesus, who envisaged his community as a circle of friends (John 15:12-16), a discipleship of equals (Matthew 23:2-10; Galatians 3:26-28)."

Perhaps a first step could be to delink governance from priesthood, from which women are banned.

A second could be to accord the same importance and urgency to allowing women deacons, as is being given to allowing married priests.

Sister Philomena pointed to a third. "More than shedding prejudice, the cardinal needs to admit that the hierarchy should shed their fear of sharing power, and their need to control the laity and women in particular," she said, "because even when they know and can see women are capable, they go out of their way to marginalize them."

Stepping up their campaign for women's rights, members of *Satyashodhak* and the Indian Women's Theological Forum, or IWTF, drafted a memorandum demanding equality in the Catholic Church, which was endorsed by over 150 Catholic women and men. It was handed over for Gracias on International Women's Day 2020, as part of a global campaign of Catholic Women's Council.

The IWTF is an example of how Indian women have prevailed. Comprised of academic and grassroots women theologians from across India, it was the initiative of Virginia Saldanha, also a member of *Satyashodhak*, when she served as executive secretary of the CBCI women's commission.

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Initially supported by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, it was abandoned by the bishops when the women began asking uncomfortable questions about women's roles in the church. However, it continues today as an independent body, developing theologies to reform patriarchal church structures and practices.

Following the NCR interview, Indian women are waiting to see what concrete steps will be taken by Gracias, and the episcopal bodies that he influences, to promote the leadership of women in the church.

The last word belongs to Rachael Alphonso, a doctoral student and member of *Satyashodhak*: "I'll really believe the words of Cardinal Gracias when he walks the talk."

[Astrid Lobo Gajiwala has a Ph.D. in medicine and post-graduate diplomas in tissue banking, bioethics, and theology. She is a resource person for the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, and a consultor for the Indian bishops' Commission for Women. She was a member of the drafting committee for the Indian bishops' Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India, and is a founding member of both *Satyashodhak* and the Indian Women's Theological Forum.]