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## INDIA | Catholic Bishops Conference to Empower Dalit

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) issued a policy document on Dalit empowerment Dec. 13, in which it acknowledged that "caste discrimination is a grave social sin" and committed to ensuring that the practice of untouchability will not be tolerated within the church.

The document, entitled "Policy of Dalit Empowerment in the Catholic Church in India: An Ethical Imperative to Build Inclusive Communities," includes commitments such as ensuring that Dalits are given equal employment opportunities; more competent and cohesive lay leadership development for Dalit men and women at both regional and diocesan levels in the Church; building an interactive portal and helpline for the community; dedicated funding and scholarship structures to assist marginalized Dalit students to further their education and to facilitate the Dalit community's access social justice.

Baselios Cardinal Cleemis, Major Archbishop-Catholicos and President of the Catholic Bishops's Conference of India said, "I whole heartedly urge the Bishops, priests, religious and lay leaders to internalize and implement the policy at all levels. We should consider it as our obligation based on Christian faith to empower our children, sisters and brothers of Dalit origin and other marginalized people."

Dr. John Dayal, the former National President of the All India Catholic Union, noted, "The CBCI Dalit empowerment document is a powerful commitment to a seminal struggle against birth based discrimination that corrodes human dignity even as it limits citizenship and other constitutional rights. Succeeding governments have effectively strengthened caste as well as religious discrimination. In appeasing upper castes, a disservice was done to a marginalized group. While other churches had taken a lead, this document brings the three Rites of the Catholic Church including the two Oriental churches into the frontline of the struggle."

Almost 65% of the Indian Catholic community is Dalit who have endured a long history of discrimination and injustice in India. Christian and Muslims Dalits are legally excluded from “Scheduled Castes” status, which means that they are denied employment opportunities such as holding elected office, which would otherwise be available to Dalits who profess Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism. Their legal status also means that Muslim and Christian Dalits are denied legal protections in matters such as wrongful occupation of land, malicious criminal suits or humiliation.

In 2008, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief echoed the recommendations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination to restore the eligibility for affirmative action to all members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and that membership should not have any link to the individual’s choice of religion.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “CSW warmly welcomes this landmark policy document. This policy, if put to work effectively, will go a long way to elevate the status of Dalits as a social class who have long been ostracized at every level in society. They deserve to be respected and treated as equal Indian citizens.”