

More Dalit priests needed in India, Cardinal Gracias says

There are few Dalit church officials despite the group making up nearly two-thirds of India's Catholics
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Cardinal Oswald Gracias of Bombay has appealed to Dalit Catholic lay leaders to promote priestly vocations in their communities as a way to end discrimination they face within the church.

"Promoting vocations among the Dalits will lead to a transformation in the church as well as in society," said Cardinal Gracias while speaking in Mumbai at the March 18-19 meeting of National Council of Dalit Christians.

The cardinal who heads Bombay Archdiocese is among nine cardinals Pope Francis assigned to help reform the Roman Curia and the administration of the Catholic Church.

Cardinal Gracias, who is president of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India, said Indian bishops are at the forefront of the Dalit Christian struggle to end discrimination.

"God created us equal but separation comes from man because of his selfishness," the cardinal said.

S.S. Waghmare, general secretary of National Council of Dalit Christians told ucanews.com that they are "ready to work in collaboration with the church that has always been supportive."

Waghmare said people like Cardinal Gracias speaking up for Dalits "is a huge boost."

Christians of Dalit origin are estimated to make up 30 percent of the country's 27 million Christians. Even so they face discrimination in the church.

"Communal eating and intermarriage is still not possible between out-caste Dalit people and caste people in the Christian community," said a memorandum Dalit bishops submitted to Pope Francis in

2013.

Dalit students are discriminated against in seminaries and houses of formations. Dalit leaders and clergy are not included in decision-making bodies of the church. Some parishes have even demarcated separate burial grounds and feast days to stop them mingling with others, according to Dalit leaders.

"The cardinal's appeal was very encouraging and it is a step in the right direction," said Father Z. Devasagaya Raj, secretary of the Indian bishops' Office for Dalits and Indigenous People.

Dalits, formerly known as "untouchables," are those outside India's four-tier cast system. In the past century, thousands converted to Christianity and Islam to escape the social oppression they faced in Hinduism.

However, the change of religion failed to change the socio-economic situation and discrimination continues, said Father Raj.

According to Indian bishops, Dalit Catholics form 65 percent of the Indian Catholic population only 5 percent are present in the religious hierarchy of the Indian church.

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