SEDOS
Bulletin 2009
Vol. 41, No. 1/2
January-February

"MISSION AS COMEDY"

A Centennial Symposium on Mission ad gentes as 'Holy Folly'

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Pio Estepa, SVD

EDITORIAL

On 6 December 2008 the SVD and SSpS jointly organized a modest intercongregational symposium at the SVD Generalate in Rome in remembrance of Sts Arnold Janssen and Joseph Freinademetz[1] – both of whom died about a century ago. Yet it was not meant to recall the saintly lives of a congregational Founder and a mission pioneer. Rather, their joint death centennial was taken as a festive occasion for both congregations (SSpS and SVD) to look back and reflect on their respective mission journeys as Word-lit and Spirit-led *comedies* … communal stories in which sin and grace are at odds yet at play, through lowly agents with lofty visions, whose clumsy arms reap a bounteous catch with but fragile nets. The symposium's title, 'Mission as Holy Folly', alludes to what the clerical colleagues of Fr Arnold thought about the timing and expanse of his missionary dream during Bismarck's Kulturkampf in Germany of the 19th century.

Dramaturgy classifies all stories within the inclusive range of two narrative poles: *tragedy* and *comedy*. One contradistinction made between these basic narrative types is that: whereas *tragedy* features the 'fall' of its major protagonist from a glad to a sad situation in life, *comedy* narrates the 'rise' from a sad start to a glad ending. In this first and broad sense the Gospel can indeed be only comedy … in fact, a *divina commedia*, as Dante entitled a literary masterpiece of his. In the same light the first speaker, Fr Nestor Inacio Schwerz (OFM general mission secretary) offered the first reflection on 'Contemplatives and Mission'.

Today, however, TV sitcoms have inextricably associated *comedy* with laughter. This subsequent connotation of the term *comedy* seems incongruent with the 'serious' theme of mission *ad gentes*. Yet the next two main speakers – Sr Maria Burke (SSpS general chapter secretary) and Fr Antonio Pernia (SVD Superior General)– welcomed the seeming clash as they offered their respective reflections on 'Mission and Communion', then 'Mission and Compassion'. Their reflections brought out how faith-inspired humour consists in receptive contemplation of the sundry incongruities experienced during their respective congregational mission journeys. As the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard aptly wrote: 'The deeper a person lives, the more s/he discovers the comical'. Humour is the first bold leap of faith out of chaotic situations that may look as absurd tragedies … towards trusting hope that 'everything works for the good of those who love God' (Rom 8:28).

Further added to this issue are two short reflections that sketch out spiritual portraits of Sts Arnold Janssen and Joseph Freinademetz. The last one resumes the theme of Fr Schwerz' talk by offering a sample of missionary contemplation on how a popular African religiosity ritually links the sacred with the comic.

(Footnote)

[1] St Arnold Janssen was the founder of the congregations of the Divine Word Missionaries (SVD) and the Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit (SSpS). The third that later followed was the contemplative congregation of the Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit of Perpetual Adoration (SSpSAP), founded then in view of serving as constant prayer support for the missionary enterprise of the Church … and in a special way, for that of their aforesaid 'brother' and 'sister' congregations. St Joseph Freinademetz, on the other hand, was one of the two pioneers of the SVD missions in China. He was canonized on 5 October 2003 together with Arnold Janssen and Daniel Comboni – equally a Founder of two missionary congregations, male and female.

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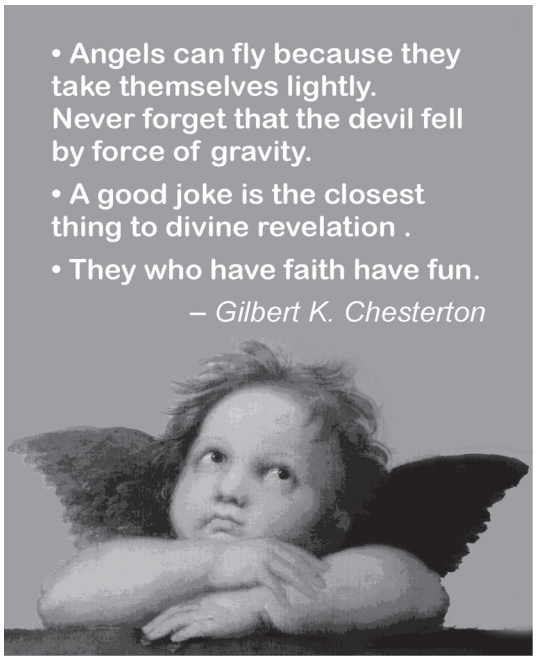
Maria Theresia Hörnemann, SSpS

"Mission as Holy Folly"

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

On behalf of our Missionary Family of Steyl, I welcome you most sincerely to our day of recollection here, at the Generalate of the Society of the Divine Word.



The 100th anniversary of the death of our Founder Arnold Janssen and of one of the first missionaries to China, Joseph Freinademetz, is the motivation for us to reflect together on what these "Holy fools" have to say to us today. We, as a community of Sisters and Brothers, who believe that still today, just as 100 years ago, it is worth squandering our life, so to speak, to continue the mission of Jesus, belong to those who, daring to live according to an alternative set of criteria, risk everything on a single venture, believing that a different world is possible. Knowing that we, Steyl missionaries, are not alone in this, we have invited members of other congregations who share the same dream. We are pleased to see you here. We look forward to hearing your contribution to our common theme in the light of your own congregation's tradition and spirituality.

We do have to be a trifle crazy nowadays if we want to be players in God's comedy that frequently turns popular values upside-down – serving instead of ruling, non-violent reaction in response to violence, voluntarily leaving home and family and venturing into a totally different culture and language, accepting the difficulties of an international community, risking one's life for the sake of the poor and oppressed, critical in the face of the slogans and trends of our times, and taking our orientation from the Word of God. Our belief that we can achieve something through our way of living and acting, is facing a huge challenge in view of all that is making headlines right now: financial crisis, terror, wars, hunger, violence in the name of God....

I hope that our sharing will be fruitful. It would be great if we can go home at the end of the day with an even deeper conviction that it is worthwhile to be among those of the "Holy Folly", those who – like the saints of those days – cannot stop speaking of God and his Reign of love and justice, whether it is heard gladly or meets with resistance, those who take themselves and their task seriously but without self-importance; those who have a good deal of humour, because they trust that, for those who love him, God turns all to good.

May the Holy Spirit guide us in all this and gift us with openness for whatever he wishes to say to us through our Sisters and Brothers here.

Nestor Inacio Schwerz, OFM

Contemplatives in Mission

Introduction

I am not here as a theologian or academician nor am I here as contemplative monk. My point of departure is the experience of accompanying and working with my fellow brothers in the Order and other missionaries. What I share with you this morning is nothing spectacular or altogether new. I believe we all basically share the same hope and face the same problems.

Missionary consciousness is becoming weak in our Orders. But during initial formation there is much emphasis on mission. The missionary journeys and practices of St Francis of Assisi have not much following today. There is a real and disturbing resistance to go out, to be on the way, to reach out to other peoples and cultures, to make our missionary presence felt, to live in creative fidelity and to explore newer and more effective ways of evangelization. The challenges we face today inhibit us from exploring new forms and initiatives. We have a rich contemplative tradition, but we cannot say we are contemplatives. However we need to be contemplatives and optimists.

What is contemplation? What kind of contemplation do we need for our mission today?

Under this section we do not intend to enter the contemplative life as a specific vocation in religious life, be it Christian or of any other religion. We also do not want to deepen the inner dynamics or the method of the exercise of contemplation.

In the *Lectio Divina* contemplation comes after reading, meditation and prayer. Contemplation is not a rational activity of reflection, nor is it meditation, nor simply prayer; but it presupposes all these exercises. Contemplation has a dimension of gratuity, an apparent passivity in front of a reality, and an aspect of mystery with a capacity to penetrate us with its beauty, light, strength and depth.

It is a special spiritual experience, which is lived as an experience of interiority. It is a special religious experience which leaves the field of the intellect behind and makes the facts of faith understood with a different "taste". It is a way of clinging profoundly to the mystery, of allowing oneself to be transformed by the mystery. More than an activity of the human intellect or of the mind to appropriate to oneself the reality, it is an event which breaks into the human life in a characteristic way like grace and gift (*cf.* Hans Schaller. *Betrachtung.* In: C. Schütz (org). *Praktisches Lexikon der Spiritualität,* Herder, 1988, pp. 138-144).

It is characteristic of the religions to find in the contemplative spirituality their deepest union with God. The human spirit feels the need to nourish itself with the true, with the beautiful, the good and the noble. It is a spiritual state in which the believer abandons him/herself to God in the search for the answer to his existential question. The human being who lives the life of the Spirit, brings alive his/her own faith when he/she enters in contact with God *(cf. Contemplazione di Dio,* Symposium Assisi …).

Contemplation in Traditional Religions

History presents us with concrete examples of contemplatives and mystics of various religions, be it in the great oriental traditions, be it in the native populations in America or on other continents. In the country I come from, the South of Brazil, we have traces of the presence of a people who is profoundly contemplative, e.g. the people of the "Guarani".

These people have the understanding that all beings are a Word of the highest divinity. This asks from them the capacity to listen in order to understand the Word. Therefore it is a people who is deeply silent.

*When a baby is born the religious leader, the "*Paje*" recollects himself to choose the name. This name has a religious meaning and expresses a real mission. Each person is an expression of the Word and has to seek and find the significance of being happy and whole. These are a people (researches) who seek an earth without evil. They reveal an impressive reverence for the earth and for all creatures. They show it by resistance to use more technology than necessary for getting farm products, because they see in it an aggression towards nature.*

It is a people who hardly enters into a conflict with other peoples and prefers to look for an earth without evil, a utopian world, in which harmony reigns between humans and other beings. They are a people with a deep sense of religiosity, of family and community life, with respectful and loving care for children and the elderly without exclusion or marginalization. But sadly it is also a people dying out in a commercial society which sees the earth as a merchandise that can be used and exploited. The sons and daughters of these people are forced to migrate to cities and into misery.

Recently I had the privilege of meeting a group of "Sufi" in Turkey and then of following with Buddhist men and women monastic life in Korea. They are profoundly contemplative groups, dedicated to meditation and prayer. What impressed me most was that they were people of peace, of dialogue and openness towards things which are different; they were profoundly cordial, welcoming, with a simple lifestyle, poor, austere and non consumeristic.

Sufism represents a long experience of spirituality. The *sufi* confraternities have taken a certain healthy distance from the world as it was considered by some to be an essential and vital element of Muslim society – "the heart of Islam". They claim: "Often we are unaware of the richness which comes from God because of the hardness of heart and the sin of oblivion".

The *sufis* are considered 'heretics' by the official Islam and often they are persecuted. But they have the admirable attitude of dialogue, of openness towards others, of peace and tolerance, of respect and cosmic communion.

COSMIC ORDER AND MYTHIC HUMOUR

A Bantu ancestral tale narrates …

Sleepless from having been pestered by mosquitoes a whole night long, a village chief rose from bed in bad humour. He then resolves to walk all the way to God's distant village to protest against them. Arriving there at dusk, he strides straight to His presence and complains: 'If you are truly wise and good, why did you create such pests as mosquitoes?'

God calms him down, offers him food and roof for the night, and promises to walk with him the next day back to his home – where He would explain why. At dawn God does as promised, and the two reach the chief's village as the sun is setting. The chief sits resting from the long trek when he notices a mosquito on his arm. As he raises his other hand to swat it, God stops him in time and says: 'Let it go and just watch what happens next'.

As the sated insect flies away, the chief sees how it gets caught into a web where a spider soon comes to swallow it. The spider next crawls down to the ground where it gets pecked by a chicken … that reminds the chief what to serve for meal. At supper Guest then asks host: 'So, have you now some idea of why mosquitoes exist?'

A Daoist sage narrates…

A wealthy man held a great feast. And when all had had their fill of varied vegetable and meat delights, he stood up and exclaimed: 'Let us thank Heaven for its bounteous kindness to humankind! It provides us with plants and beasts of land, sea and sky … all for us to choose and eat from!'.

Puzzled by this remark, an outspoken child among the guests butted in: 'But mosquitoes and gnats, serpents and tigers bite us too. So does this mean that Heaven created us humans as food for them?'.

The Buddhist Contemplative Tradition is a rich tradition of wisdom, ethics, meditation and contemplation. It is fundamental for Buddhism to awaken the inner desire in order to make room for the search for truth – truth about oneself and about all other things, and for full illumination which alone can understand re-incarnations and life in its wholeness. The method is demanding because it needs discipline, perseverance, austerity of lifestyle, precise methods of meditation and prayer with a special accent on silence. It is a way of human perfection based on education of the heart by means of the contemplative practice of respect for life in all its manifestations, of mutual love and care for the poor. In Buddhist monasteries one is often profoundly impressed by the cordial welcome offered to all.

Quite obviously they keep a distance from the worldly realities and from historical events. But in dialogue they reveal their conscience and consciousness towards all the great problems of humankind. They are capable of assuming attitudes and positions with great political significance, as was the case with the monks of Myanmar, who were persecuted, attacked and imprisoned by Government's forces.

Contemplation in the Hebrew and the Christian Traditions In the Hebrew and the Christian traditions contemplation has to be understood in its profound relationship with the Word: as a way of belonging to God with one's whole heart. In the Biblical narratives God himself appears as the first contemplative. After he had created all by the power of his Word, he sanctified the Sabbath as the day of contemplation. "God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good" (Gn 1:31).

In Sacred Scripture to contemplate means, in the first place, to enter into familiarity with the Word. The Biblical God is a God who communicates himself, a God who speaks. His Word is efficacious and creative. It is an "illuminating lamp" (*cf.* Ps 119 [118]:105), it is "rain which waters and makes fruitful the earth" (*cf.* Is 55:10), and "makes warm the heart" (*cf.* Lk 24:32). To discover the Word of God means to enter into light (*cf.* Ps 119 [118]:129-130).

The Word indicates the deep soul of the reality, which while it is Being and Existence, is at the same time hidden and veiled. When God pronounces his Word he brings forth what is "in" the things, unveiling their inner face, their vocation and their identity. When God talks to us, God communicates himself, "throws himself to us", and gives himself "over" to us in the freedom of Love and in his being and acting.

HEBREW BIBLICAL HUMOUR

Exegetes agree that the Old Testament '*Book of Jonah*' (with but 2 to 3 pages) was intended to be a comic parable. After the Babylonian Exile pious Hebrews returned to Palestine. They rebuilt the Temple and launched a religious renewal that verged on xenophobic fundamentalism. For instance, Jewish men married to pagan wives were urged to divorce and to send the women back to their homelands … regardless of whether they loved them as spouses or had borne them children.

During that critical period the prophetic joke of Jonah arose to make fun of a narrow-minded and hard-hearted Hebrew sent by God to 'foreign missions'. There he refused to preach any 'Good News' … but just fire and brimstones to pagans. The comic surprise that dismayed him was that they were converted and saved.

The Book of Jonah had a deep impact both on the message and the medium of Jesus' preaching. Whenever he spoke of the Reign of God, so is written in the gospels, he always spoke in parables – tales revealing the prophetic humour of the Christ.

By decree of the King and his Nobles, man and beast shall fast … cover themselves with sackcloth and call loudly to God; let everyone turn from evil and violence. Who knows, God may relent and forgive … (Jonah 3:8-9).

Enzo Bianchi says :

"*It is for this that the Word of God fills the universe, for his will is imprinted into each thing, as it is the only fountain of all that lives. In the word of God we have come to existence, we move and are, as he guides and emerges each thing". He concludes with a very important affirmation: "When we hear his (God's) voice and remove the veil, we discover the true and profound reality and we find ourselves unexpectedly in front of the Author of things who communicates with us*".

The Word also indicates the act of God – his act in the complexity of events. God intervenes in history and makes it '*salvation'* history. The believer has therefore to discern to find in the complexity of personal, social, political and cultural events the presence (*kairos*, the favourable moment) of God. In the Old Testament the consciousness of the nearness of the loving God is evident. Yahweh, the absolute transcendent Lord, comes near to man, chooses him and protects him. Even more: he loves him as deeply as a father loves his son, or a groom his bride. "What is man that you should be mindful of him, or the son of man that you should care for him" (Ps 144 [143]:3)? [Josè Luis Illanes. *La contemplazione di Dio nella tradizione cristiana: visione sintetica*. In: L. Touse (org.). *La contemplazione cristiana: esperienza e dottrina*. Lib. Ed. Vaticana, 2005, pp. 15-16].

The contemplative is one who, exactly because he has integrated what is divine and what is human, is completely filled by the word of God. He/she succeeds by "having the same blood" to understand the infinite and the smallest presences of the word of God in each reality in history. The contemplative is not a man cut off from history, he is one who has the eyes of the heart so sharp that he can see the presence of the God where others see only the presence of evil and sin.… He indeed knows in his heart that from every angle, from the darkest corners of the earth every thing and every existence invokes and calls insistently for his Lord" (P. Sandro Carotta, OSB).

Conclusion

The Christian disciple must both listen to and learn from the Triune God to know what he (God) thinks, feels, desire, wants, and reveals. The disciple must also listen to and learn from the Church, from its *magisterium*, its theological and spiritual riches. It is also important that the disciple listen to and learn from the people, the audience whom he addresses as a missionary, in order to proclaim the Good News.

In order to collaborate with both Jesus Christ and His Spirit in the missions, both an assiduous contemplation and profound communion with him (Christ) is needed.

Only the Spirit can thrust people and communities in all directions:

· ***Towards outside:*** The Spirit moves the community towards other people, cultures, and other religions.

· ***Towards all:*** The Spirit does not exclude anyone; he wants to reach everyone. He is like the wind which no one knows where it comes from or where it is going. He gives us the freedom to love all without limits, spurring us onward beyond the borders.

· ***Towards the poor:*** The Spirit makes us contemplate the face of the poor, the suffering, the marginalized, and excluded. At the same time, he awakens within us solidarity to work for peace, human rights, justice, and reconciliation.

· ***Towards the future:*** The Spirit assures hope for the future, even in the most chaotic situations, in pain, violence, and in situations of death.

· ***Towards the earth:*** The Spirit spurs us onwards to assume an attitude of responsibility towards our common home, i.e. planet earth. He prompts us towards all creatures, environmental justice, the defense of Amazonia, and towards a new rapport with nature, overcoming the logic of the market.

Contemplation helps us to believe more deeply in the Risen One and to proclaim his Kingdom in the horizon of the eschatological fullness of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rv 21:1). The God-with-us is always the God who walks before us; he is the absolute future for the Church, for religious life, humanity, and creation.

Ref.: December 2008, Rome.

Arlindo Pereira Dias, SVD

Panel Response to:

"Contemplative in Mission"

by Fr Nestor Inacio Schwerz, OFM

It is *schwerz*[1] to comment on the profound reflection of Fr Nestor on missionary contemplation. Yet, because we are both Brazilians, it would be easy for us to turn this Symposium on mission as "holy folly" into comic carnival. One can slightly paraphrase a known Portuguese saying[2] and still be truthful: "of holiness and madness we all have a bit". In fact, it is by contemplatively spicing up what is holy with some folly that one makes life more cheerful and creative.

Allow me to highlight a few points in Fr Nestor's talk that to my mind pose challenges for missionaries *ad gentes* today.

1. Contemplation is for everyone

Fr Nestor stressed that contemplation is not a matter for the exclusive practice of some religious *élite*. Charles de Foucauld, one great contemplative of the last century, once said: "If contemplative life were only possible behind convent walls or in the silent desert, for justice's sake, we should provide a small convent for every mother and a mini-desert for every labourer forced to earn his living amid urban hustle and bustle". Archbihop Oscar Arnulfo Romero of El Salvador expressed the same idea in more positive terms: "How happy is the day when every baptized Christian comes to understand that one's profession is priestly work! Just as I celebrate mass at this altar, every carpenter also offers mass in his workshop … every doctor with his scalpel … every saleslady at a market stall … every taxi-driver at the steering wheel". Is this not what contemplation truly means: to transform our work and life into a contemplative celebration of self-giving love?

Historically, monasticism had served as the main model for religious life. The monastic lifestyle views contemplative prayer as transcending mundane reality. As a consequence many so called "active congregations" are still struggling to reconcile communal prayer with committed service. I do not mean to say that people's problems and sufferings in the mission field are not raised in prayer. I just want to point out that worldly or secular society is not seen as the primary locus for encountering the hidden yet active presence of God. Perhaps it is for this reason that at times we experience a conflict between what we pray for and what we live through. Formed as "conventual" missionaries, our first challenge is to learn how to contemplate on God's presence at the heart of the world.

2. Contemplative "ecstasy" sustains compassionate "enstasy"

Contemplation "must be cultivated with earnest effort", said Fr Nestor. God is the first contemplative. After creating everything, "God beheld what he had made, and saw that it was good" (Gn 1:31). That was why the Almighty devoted the Sabbath to restful contemplation. From

this truth arises a vital spiritual cycle: to stand back ('ecstasy') and *contemplate on the fruit* of one's work, and to move forth ('entasis') and *contemplate in the course* of one's work. We must spend some time in contemplation somewhere, otherwise we cannot contemplate at anytime, anywhere. In this regard the *lectio divina* has been a tested way of sustaining commitment to missionary action.

The wellspring of all missionary contemplation can only be the Divine Word. Long before being written down as Sacred Scripture, the Word has been and still is the living presence of God transforming current events into "salvation history". From us, Christians and missionaries, this then demands persistent effort to discern God's loving voice speaking through our experiences in the midst of life and with our fellow humans. It further demands that we contemplate without forgetting the reality of evil in this world and its need to be transformed. For contemplation detached from compassionate action is unholy folly.

3. Contemplation is communing with Creation

"God reveals himself while hiding from the person who seeks Him", Fr Nestor also said. He went on to say that to contemplate is "to let oneself be engulfed by God's light and force, beauty and meaning". True contemplation springs from being awe-struck by God's Creation. Who has not marvelled at the mysterious force that rules the universe, the Earth … as well as sustaining life in the plants and animals around us? Archbishop Dom Helder Camara, the great Brazilian contemplative, once wrote a poem on a mystic experience within anyone's reach: "Whenever I travel by air and feel afraid, I ask myself: what scares you? And tell myself you are in the airplane … that is within the planet … that is within the universe … that is in the bosom of God … who is within you".

Such an experience gives rise to a loving sense of responsibility for all creatures – animate and inanimate alike. God entrusts them all to our creative stewardship. To fulfill this noble mission, we have to learn to harmonize our need for living on natural resources and our care for our planet as cosmic home – not only for the present humanity, but also for the other generations still to come.

4. Jesus of Nazareth is God's contemplative response to sin and evil

Fr Nestor states that contemplation means creating an inner space with all one's strength and weaknesses, with all one's doubts and hopes, so that the Other can be present. Defied by evil in the world, God could not remain a mere spectator. It would really have been unworthy of God to just passively watch the fall of humanity. Mercy urged God to break into human reality and to show a way out for every human being. God did this in the person of Jesus who by his Incarnation assumed all of our human poverty. Thus, Christian contemplation leads us to perceive the compassionate presence of God among the poor.

Mahatma Gandhi, another great contemplative, said in his time that, "if God were to appear today in India, he would take the form of bread". He surely was not referring to the Eucharist, yet had an inkling of the form that the Christ chose to be constant in his special presence among us. A Christian cannot contemplate without having bread in his/her stomach, but neither can s/he contemplate by remaining oblivious to the millions of people starving to death!

Contemplation must change not only the person but also the reality in which s/he lives. Christian contemplation is feeling and beating with the heart of God present in the midst of all those who suffer … among whom Christ remains enfleshed. It strengthens our conviction in faith that good is stronger than all the forces of evil.

5. History is the other horizon of missionary contemplation

Another striking statement Fr Nestor made, is that history – in the course of which diverse cultures rise, grow, and wane – is the other horizon of missionary contemplation. The Spirit of God that brought creative order to primal chaos is the same Spirit now leading our present to a brighter future than humans could ever hope for! A spiritual legacy that Saint Arnold Janssen handed down to the congregations that he founded is the simple prayer: "May the darkness of sin and the night of unbelief vanish before the light of the Word and the Spirit of grace". For him contemplation was the prayerful quest for the enlightening Word and the empowering Spirit breaking through whatever dark chaos humanity may be floundering in.

Fr Nestor went on to say that, "the disciple must learn from the culture and religion of a people – that is, their particular way of relating to God, to others, to themselves, and to Nature". We missionaries are further urged to contemplate on how the Lord is mysteriously present even among those not affiliated to any church or religion.

It seems me that Fr Nestor concludes with an apocalyptic note on contemplation. He advises to us "to look at all sides, towards the future, to the earth". Does this not demand possessing "the seven eyes of the Spirit" – a spiritual, mental and physical ability beyond measure? True contemplation alerts our body to feel and touch, to sing and dance, to cry and scream … to transform our tearful reality into a festive banquet for all. How are we to develop all these senses without getting lost in this world of sundry neon-lighted distractions? Behold, it is time to begin the holy folly of contemplation and to realize the dream of the new creation.

Footnotes

[1] A German word that figuratively means 'hard'.

[2] The original Portuguese saying goes, "of prudence and madness…".

THEOLOGY AND HUMOUR

It is strange in a way that Christian theology lost sight for so many years of the comic sensibility. Dante, perhaps the greatest Christian poet of any era, did, after all, name his masterpiece The *Divine Comedy*. Don Quixote, the creation of Cervantes' consummate Catholic imagination: is certainly a comic figure in the broadest sense of the term. At the time these men wrote, sculptors were carving gargoyles on cathedrals and artists were painting pictures of an infant God sitting in his mother's arms playing with the globe of the earth. *Deus Ludens* is the playing God. He winks at man, his all-too-serious creature, disclosing to him the comic dimensions of it all. Yet these artists and writers were not theologians. What about the formal theological thinkers themselves?

It is true that at least one medieval theologian, Petrus Cantor, is known to have asked during the course of his ruminations whether Christ ever laughed. Cantor was of the solemn opinion that he must have if he was truly man. What disturbs us today is that Cantor should ever have felt the need to ask the question. Other theologians did a little better, but not much.

Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools* (Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 150-151.

Maria Burke, SSpS

Comedy and Compassion

1. Introduction

My assigned topic directs me to relate four key ideas: *comedy, compassion, experiential learning and systemic wisdom*. I think it is easier to consider experiential learning about comedy and compassion first from the vantage point of individual missionaries muddling onward with the best of intentions and then to distill what might be helpful for missionary religious Congregations.

II. Comedy

1. Definition

Humour, according to Aristotle, began with the writings of Plato. At least that is what one of the references I consulted claims. Definition of terms, quotations from experts certainly have a place in many contexts. But I do not feel that this is one such situation. We could spend a goodly amount of time differentiating the precise meanings of humour and the specific responses they cause. So, let us just agree that some things seem funny to us and that experiencing something funny is usually pleasant and helpful.

2. Comedy as the Christian worldview

Your worldview is your vantage point; it is, in a manner of speaking, your values, concerns, preferences in action. I learned about a worldview in action from Sr Brunhilde, a nurse-midwife in Papua New Guinea. Sister B. is in her 80's now and is back in the German Province. I lived with her in Alexishafen in the 1970's.

Sister simply loved being a nurse and missionary. She particularly loved working with mothers and mothers-to-be. She never said, "Oh, I just love doing this work!". But her whole approach and involvement day after day just communicated that she found her meaning and fulfillment in this work. She became Provincial in PNG and frequently needed to visit the sisters in various stations, but she did not like to drive. I was working with the St Therese Sisters and could pretty much set my own schedule – so I often was her *driver boi.* This gave me the chance to see the world she lived in. Her world was populated by mothers and babies, pregnant women and ladies worn down to "bun nating". Without spending so many hours with Sr Brunhilde driving around the north coast, I certainly would not have seen all these women and beautiful kids. But listening to Sr B. noticing details and specific insights opened my awareness to dimensions of reality I never could have sensed on my own. In her own way she evangelized me to the life of PNG mothers.

Comedy can be a very helpful worldview for us as Christians in these times. Humour can be summarized as an appreciation of the incongruous. So much of our belief system really is incongruous. God loves us personally. We are going to live forever. We can contemplate the Triune God. But we get frayed to the limit by the person next to us because she hums all the time.

When I was studying at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago I got to know Fr Charlie Walter, a Comboni missionary who had worked in South Africa and in Peru. He had also been Assistant General here in Rome. He was very bright and innovative, but had never been famous for his patience. A few years after we finished at CTU Charlie became quite ill and was moved from the hospital to a hospice. About a week before he died, in his own cerebral way,

he summarized his struggle to be a good, kind, patient patient. He said, "I know I have cancer, that it is terminal, and I have come to accept it; it is O.K. There is so much pain, there is no way to lie or sit or stand that lessens the pain. But I know it will not go on too much longer. I cannot do anything for myself, and when the nurses help me they often make everything worse. But I'm learning to behave myself. I can handle being helpless, in pain, even dying. But I cannot understand that the one thing that causes me absolute rage is that every day they bring me cold mashed potatoes on the dinner tray". Laughter softens the pain of our own short-comings.

3. Spirituality of humour

(The venerable parable of *The Emperor's New Clothes*).

Humour takes us outside of ourselves; comedy is truth telling; laughter is a form of self detachment. For example, the wonderful film *Amadeus* can be viewed as the story of the vocation of Antonio Salieri, court composer to Joseph II of Austria. Salieri could not understand how God could gift Mozart with such talent when he did nothing to merit it and very little to nurture it. Salieri ends by attempting suicide and is placed in a mental institution. In the final scene he confesses his jealousy of Mozart and his anger at God; then he is rolled through the halls of the institute which are lined with other inmates in tragic states of mental breakdown. Selieri draws himself up as if he were the Pope being borne on the *gestatorial chair*, and blesses the people he passes, saying, "Mediocrities of the world, I absolve you".

4. Physical benefits of humour

Humour relaxes us, gets us out of our heads, divine inspiration happens when we open up, loosen our grip on how things should be. Humour helps us to know our place in the plan of things. Language learning is one of the greatest opportunities in the lives of missionaries. It is also a wonderful school for learning humour because it offers endless opportunities to experience our limitations.

Every morning, praise the Lord!

III. Compassion

The role of compassion in Christian living, particularly in ministerial work, is taking on new significance in our time. New insights come from research into entomology and linguistics. None the less, the traditional definition of compassion, *to feel with,* provides a wide scope of insight for missionaries. I find it useful to consider compassion as a process that, once engaged, becomes almost automatic.

Compassion is to feel with another so intensely that we are moved to take action on their behalf. Key elements:

– **To feel**: it is a responsibility for missionaries to maintain their ability to feel, to be touched by the events around them. We need to be aware of our personal escape routes. Some of us hide in our heads, unwilling to show compassion because problems are logical and to be expected. At other times we indulge in sarcasm because we are afraid we do not have sufficient reserves of energy to assist one more person. Some situations are overwhelming and seem beyond our ability to witness, much less improve, them.

– **To feel with**: the realities active in the lives of those they encounter. We can do this only if we have experienced something similar or if we are consciously open and listening to others with all our senses. This degree of openness requires tremendous self-discipline; indeed the Whiteheads insist that these skills are the fruit of the asceticism of ministry in our times. Previous experience in our lives enables us to recognize the dynamics at work in another person. Virtue enables us to move beyond our own story to witness the struggle of others. It is an occupational hazard for missionaries to become jaded to tales of struggle in the lives of those around them. We risk compassion fatigue if we do not cultivate a spirituality of acccompanying.

– To feel for: Sharing an experience can lead to bonding and mutual appreciation. However it

does not guarantee a positive connection. Due to subtle perversities within us, at times difficult lessons in our past incline us to expect a toughness in others. Or years of living the common life with a sister in community have given us an accurate insight into her personality and behaviour. But, because of pettiness or competition rather than use our insight compassionately we use it as a weapon to push her buttons, to deliberately cause pain to the other.

– To feel with passion: Passion means intensity, feeling with energy. Passion is a sort of generator for life and involvement, it provide the drive and meaning for our activities. Our lifestyle allows us a great focus not available to many people. But if we do not consciously cultivate a passionate involvement in our own life, we become dehydrated, less effective in any sort of missionary outreach. If we loose our drive and begin to take our role as bearers of the Good News for granted, our own batteries go flat and we become almost toxic, discharging the batteries of the communities with whom we are engaged.

– To feel and to act: The great cartoonist Charles Schultz frequently used Scripture as the basis for his little tales. In one such incident he portrays Charlie Brown and Linus meeting Snoopy outdoors during a blizzard. Very often the action compassion requires of us is surprisingly simple. At other times we need a real conversion of life in order to benefit another. Feeling with and for others is a starting point, but it is little if not followed through to completion.

1. Conscious compassion

All that I have said so far treats compassion as spontaneous. However we all also encounter circumstances in which we do not naturally feel with another. This may be because we do not share the experience or have sufficient understanding to automatically hone in on a common response. Or it happens that we are dealing with people that we have long been taught to avoid or even to despise. Before we can show any compassion toward them we need to dig deeper to find a genuine common tie. Sometimes this requires us to "grow up", mature and overcome barriers we have constructed that insulate us from such people. In multicultural situations we may learn that even maturing is not sufficient to unite us, a real evolution is needed.

If we admit the implications of our belief in the example of Christ's life, death and Resurrection, then we can find motivation to require ourselves to move beyond our comfortable and safe little arenas.

IV. Wisdom for the groups

How do we systematize the functioning of comedy and compassion so that they bear fruit within our systems of community life? The images I have offered of comedy as a world view and compassion as an experiential bond between persons come from the context of individual missionaries. If we mustered the potential of our members we would have a sizable force advancing the working of intercultural living. It takes skill to cross from individual approaches to organizational policy, but it begins, I think, by practicing what we preach.

1. As intercultural missionaries we start with the premise, Everyone is already saved, and we did not do it:

We are called to a marvellous mission which is witnessing to the wonders of the Lord. The Messiah has come, redemption is achieved, but not by our doing. We need to be creative in enabling our members to enjoy the results of knowing the wonders of the Lord.

2. You do not know your own strengths:

When we SSpS began having novices in PNG I would often get very irritated with the comparisons that were made between the life of the novices in Alexishafen and what a "real" novitiate was like in Steyl. I said that the PNG novices were being haunted by the hall of the Motherhouse. These stories of the glorious days of religious formation were generally presented with a mixture of outrage at how strongly conformity was enforced combined with pride in how the story-tellers endured and overcame.

Reflecting on the formation practices of 40 years ago we are required to acknowledge that yes indeed we were formed. Like bread dough, perhaps, at times we were pounded and pummelled into shape. We were introduced to strengths and abilities within us far beyond what we thought we possessed or that we would have drawn upon if left to our own preferences.

3. Mix them up and divide them evenly:

When I was very small, before I started school, my mother and her friends had a "pot luck club". Once a month about a dozen women would meet for lunch; they'd bring their youngest children and a casserole to share with the others. Most of the time the women met at a picnic grove in the forest preserve. The children could run and yell and generally get filthy dirty while the mothers talked and bandaged wounds. I was the youngest child at home. So I was used to being with older people. I learned that if I sat near the picnic table and was very quiet while the ladies were talking they would soon forget I was there and I would hear some of the most interesting things about our neighbours and their families. Most of all the women spoke about their kids who were having problems. One daughter was too shy while another was much too bold. One did not take his schoolwork seriously and another worried beyond his years. Often one or the other mother would say, "Oh, if only we could mix then up and divide them evenly". I found this idea very interesting and a little frightening.

It takes skill to help people see their own needs and limitations. Too often people, particularly young people, do not catch onto what could promote their own growth and what could better serve someone else. Our congregational practices and policies can be great blue prints for growth but need to be judiciously administered.

V. Conclusion

Comedy is a wonderful tool to free us up for living. Once a bit free from our own cramped views and concerns we can be a compassionate resource to those we encounter. Feeling with others can activate group potential for service in the mission of the Lord. This process could be the greatest drama available, intercultural evangelization.

Ref.: December 2008.

This image of the smiling crucified Christ is found in the family chapel of the Javier Castle (in Navarra, Spain). What probably inspired the anonymous sculptor was the *risus paschalis* … a Catholic belief of medieval folk piety that the first act of the Risen Christ was to laugh at having conquered the ultimate evil – Death. For this reason a curious tradition used to be practiced in certain parts of Europe: after the Easter vigil mass, the pastor would descend from the sanctuary to join the faithful at the pews, then would start a swapping of jokes to make the parish community roar with laughter … so as to resound the *risus paschalis*.

Before this smiling image St Francis Xavier learned to pray during his boyhood. Indelibly stamped in his memory, it served as inner support for him during his missionary journey through Asia. As Francis lay dying on a Japanese shore, his immediate family back in his homeland saw the crucified Christ sweating with blood.

Pio Estepa, SVD

Panel Response to:

"Comedy and Compassion"

by Maria Burke, SSpS

We normally associate 'comedy' with joy and laughter … whereas 'compassion' with tears of sympathetic sorrow over situational tragedies of others. For this reason, linking 'mission' with 'compassion' sounds harmonious. But linking 'missionary compassion' further with 'comedy' is at first hearing out of tune. In fact it offended the theological and spiritual sensibilities of some pious serious souls in our own community.

"By the waters of Babylon, we hung our harps", laments psalm 137 [136], "for how can we sing joyful praises to the Lord in a land of oppressive exile?". Echoing the psalm, we can further ask: how can we dare to laugh in our present-day world … where children hunger and slave while being robbed of a carefree childhood? … where terrorists kill masses of innocent people – even in God's name – to sow fear and panic worldwide ? … where our consumerist cultures are pushing our home planet toward rapid ecological extinction?

To this poignant question, Sr Burke's reflection gave no explicit response. Yet she has left enough insightful cues for us to figure out personal answers for ourselves.

Firstly, she said that comedy or a sense of humour is above all a spiritual "vantage point". As a *frame of mind,* comedy consists of mentally linking what are clashing or incongruous ideas and experiences. She even goes further to assert that as a *frame of faith,* comedy enables us to welcome incongruities in human life as mysterious ways by which God lovingly leads us to provident surprises.

Secondly, Sr Burke sums up the SSpS mission project as "intercultural evangelization". Evangelization, as witnessing to the Glad News of Jesus Christ, bears saving fruit only to the extent that compassion is both its motive and process. On the other hand, interculturality is a chaotic mission field whose promise of a new ecclesial or sociocultural order can neither be planned nor foreseen. All that the Holy Spirit expects from us is an openness and readiness to welcome whatever comic letdowns and surprises come our way.

Early on in learning a foreign language we as missionaries already start experiencing such comic incongruities. We struggle to say what we want to mean, but often end up dismayed to know what our listeners understood what we did not mean. Just to give an example.…

In the early 1980's I was a young and raw 'bush missionary' in the Congo (when the country was still known as Zaire). Once I was preparing a group of adolescents for first communion through a series of catechism classes. I devoted a session to explaining who Mary was, and began by recounting St Luke's narrative of the Annunciation.

The usual question-and-answer followed to find out how much the young ones had understood. So I asked: "What does the word 'virgin' mean?". There was silence. I persisted by pointing to one of them who was a shy 12-year-old girl: 'What about Suzanne here, is she a virgin or not?".

This time the response came in a loud chorus: "No, Father!". In my puzzlement I blurted, "Why not?". Soon enough a brave and bright one spoke while the others nodded in assent: "… because she has not yet conceived by the Holy Spirit".

This single case shows how language learning is not just a matter of grammar and vocabulary. As a Slovak proverb tersely put it: *"Learning to speak a new language is putting on a new soul"*. It demands feeling with and feeling for how people of other cultures think, judge and act.

After language, the next series of comic letdowns and surprises comes with having to live with *confrères* not of our prior choice. In addition to the experiential examples given by Sr Burke and Fr Pernia, let me share one more where the generation gap further complicates intercultural communal living. In the year 2000 I had the privilege to be initiated into the Australian culture and local Church by living with two diocesan priests: an elderly Irish monsignor 15 years my senior, and his young Australian vicar 15 years my junior. Because their pastoral vision and approach were at odds, we rarely had friendly chats at mealtime … just lively arguments. Both of them welcomed me as their common brother mainly because I served as their referee. Most of what the elder priest said to the younger began with *don't*, whereas the latter often began with *why?*

Only once did they swap starters. That was when the elder said, "Why do you insist on your project proposal, Father? With my 41 years of pastoral experience, I'm telling you: it won't work!". His assistant snapped back: "Don't lie to me, Monsignor. All you had was just one year of pastoral experience – repeated 40 times!". I had fun listening to both of them argue, yet I felt sorry. For if only they could have heard their brilliant duel of ideas with a sense of humour, they would have learned to welcome their differences, and come to see how the pastoral wisdom of one could vitally complement the pastoral passion of the other.

The final series of comic letdowns and surprises emerges from the never closing gap between our active mission presence and our actual mission impact. That is why we often find ourselves failing to achieve the goals we have worked for, while achieving results that we could no longer wish away.

Let me narrate still another experience I had as an inexperienced missionary in the Congo. In one village that I regularly visited I developed a friendly and even joking relationship with an outgoing and outspoken grandmother. One of the few times she upset me with her serious joking happened like this:

She: Are the sisters in the convent your wives?
— Mamá, how dare you suspect that! Do not you know that the youngest among them is twice my age!
She: You really have no wife at all, not even from where you come from?
— Of course not!
She: Then you're very selfish!
— Me, selfish? I left family, country and culture to be of service here among you … and you say I'm selfish?
She: Of course! Listen … your grandparents handed down life to your parents, who in turn brought you to life in this world. What else beside selfishness made you decide to keep that life force just for yourself, when that life force is not yours?

She left me speechless. I was taken aback that, from her native African worldview, the celibate life did not mean generous sacrifice but scandalous egoism. But then she concluded: "Just the same, I like you as you are. You're happier than any married man I know in this village".
What consoled me then was the mystery that questioned the neatness of her worldview: if this God-preaching foreigner can be unmarried and happy at the same time, where is that joy coming from?

Let me end this response to Sr Burke's talk by reverting and responding to the question I began with: how can missionaries dare to laugh when so many people they serve are in pain or in tears? As she pointed out, it is surely true that comedy without compassion only ends up by turning people into passive cynics. On the other hand, compassion without comedy has finally no 'glad news' … no saving Gospel to share with those who suffer.

Antonio M. Pernia, SVD (Superior General)

*Comedy and Missionary Communion — "Mission as Holy Folly"**

The topic assigned to me for this symposium is "Comedy and Missionary Communion". After "Contemplation" and "Compassion", "Communion" is the third panel in the mission triptych that we are attempting to build in today's reflection on "Mission as Holy Folly". And the question which this third talk is supposed to raise, if not to answer, is: "What wisdom can religious congregations reap from living through the drama of forming multi-cultural communities?".

Allow me to develop this topic in three steps – following the Latin American scheme of "See", "Judge" and "Act". First, an observation ("see") about "disorder in religious Orders". Secondly, a reflection ("judge") on "wisdom from disorder". And thirdly, a recommendation ("act"), consisting of a few points about "forming inter-cultural communities".

1. Disorder in Religious Orders

Let us begin, then, with the observation about "disorder in religious Orders".

1.1. Order in Religious Orders

It is interesting to note that religious institutes are generally known to the outside world as "religious Orders". Of course, not all religious institutes are "religious Orders". Most are, in fact, actually "religious congregations". But for most people in the outside world (and even for some in religious life), this distinction is not known.[1]

In any case, our interest here is not so much in this distinction as in the word "order".

The word "order" has, of course, many meanings. One meaning is "Order" as a body, a group of people, an association, a society, an institution. As Webster's Dictionary puts it,[2] "a group of people united in a formal way as in a fraternal society". The examples given are: "monastic Order" or "masonic Order". More specifically, in this sense, Webster's refers to a "community under a religious rule". In this sense, then, "Order" is a group of people or a community bound together by the following of a rule of life. In the monastic tradition, the better known "rules of life" are those of St Pachomius and St Basil in the East, and St Augustine and St Benedict in the West. The more modern religious congregations speak of "Constitutions" rather than "Rule of Life".

The notion of a common "Rule of Life" or "Constitutions" brings us to another meaning of the word "order", namely, "order" in the sense of "orderly". Webster's says[3]: "a straight row" or "a regular series", and so we have such expressions as to "set in order" or to "put in orderly arrangement". This entails "following the law", "observing the rule", or "following a pattern", creating thereby "a state of peace and serenity" and "an orderly conduct".

Both senses of the word "order" are present in the concept of religious Orders. Religious Orders are a community of people committed to following the same "Rule of Life" and thereby creating among their members an orderly and disciplined lifestyle and a peaceful and harmonious life in common. Order in religious Orders is, obviously, a fundamental feature. It is essential for the unity of heart and mind required for the Order to fulfill its purpose and attain its goals – whether this be seeking God alone, striving after perfection, or commitment to a particular apostolic work (e.g., education, health care, proclamation of the Gospel). A "daily order" regulates what members have to do during the day and when they have to do it. Regularity often becomes uniformity. The fact that members wear the same habit projects a powerful image of order.

The order that is created in religious Orders is reinforced by the fact that, at least in the past, there was one common culture underpinning its life and work. Most religious Orders, in the past or at the beginning of their existence, were generally mono-cultural. Thus, there was a common understanding of such things as "community", "silence", "prayer", "poverty", "obedience", "chastity". The substructure of mono-culturality assured regularity, uniformity, order.

1.2. Disorder in Religious Orders

(a) Multi-cultural Membership

Order in religious Orders is threatened when they become multi-cultural. When multi-culturality replaces mono-culturality as the substructure of religious Orders, uniformity and order begin to be jeopardized. A certain kind of "disorder" replaces order, and in a certain sense, religious Orders become "religious disorders". Here, however, we need to note two moments.

The first moment, coinciding largely with the period before Vatican II, entails the phenomenon of religious Orders, like the SVD and the SSpS, having an international membership early in their congregational history. At this early stage, however, little attention was given to the specificity of the cultures of members originating from other countries or continents. Instead, the unconscious trend was to expect that these members learn, and adapt themselves to, the dominant culture of the congregation, usually the European culture. Indeed, what usually happened was that the formation programme of the "mother province" in Europe was largely transported and copied in the "mission provinces" in America, Asia, Africa and Oceania. In the SVD, what was done in Europe (that is, in Steyl and Vienna) was largely repeated in such places as Argentina, the U.S., Brazil, the Philippines, India, Indonesia. While the religious congregation was present in America, Asia and Africa, it was present as a largely European congregation. As one observer has noted:

> We SVDs, like many other Institutes, were international by geography but Euro-centric in culture and formation. Doing the novitiate in Japan or Chile did not make much of a difference. Studying theology in Buenos Aires or Bombay was about the same thing. One studied the same subjects and consulted the same authors. The prayers followed the same so-called "universal" methods, and everywhere the same norms of religious life applied, i.e. those of the post-Tridentine Catholic tradition.[4]

At this time, what was at work was a certain centralized uniformity rather than genuine multi-culturality. While this gave a strong sense of unity to the congregation, it also did not take into account the particular richness of each specific culture. Only one kind of SVD was being created, and obviously only one way of living the religious life and doing missionary work, based on the congregation's dominant culture. Indeed, at this stage, one had the feeling that in order to be an SVD one had to give up being an Indonesian, Japanese, Brazilian or African. This did not create "disorder" – that is, to the congregation as such, although it may have created "disorder" in the hearts and minds of the members from other cultures. Indeed, order was maintained and simply extended to and transplanted in other places.

The second moment came with Vatican II and its positive evaluation of the cultures of peoples. Theology began speaking of inculturation and the building up of the local Church.

There was no longer just one way of being Church or being Christian in the world. There are as many modalities as there are cultures. Similarly, in the SVD, the insight began to develop that there was not just one way of being an SVD and that the charism of the Founder could find different expressions among the various cultures of different peoples. Like the Gospel, the original charism of the Society not only could enrich but also could be enriched by the cultures in which it incarnates itself. This led to a situation whereby the Society came to be seen as being composed no longer of members from different nationalities all learning the one "SVD culture" but of members from different nationalities sharing the richness of their cultural diversity. Gradually the congregation became not just the home of one culture but the place for the interaction of various cultures.

And this creates a certain "disorder" in the religious community.

- Once I was speaking with the European formator of sisters in a particular country in Africa. And she was complaining about how difficult it was to teach the novices the value of silence. It is hard for them, she said, to keep the "*magnum silentium*" (the "great silence" from around 10:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m.). If one of them hits upon an idea or hears a piece of news or receives some information, she rushes to the other sisters to share the idea, news or information, even during the great silence at night. They cannot wait for the following morning to share the story.

- Or consider the community dining-room. Where there used to be only bread and pasta and wine, there began to appear rice and fish and all kinds of spicy condiments because of the presence of Asians or Africans (eventually, however, some Europeans developed a taste for the spicy condiments). Or the liturgy. No longer only solemn organ music, but the "noisy" guitars and drums and percussion instruments. Or clothes. No longer just black and gray and white, but colorful shirts from Africa and multi-coloured batik from Indonesia.

- And perhaps more important still the differing understandings of elements of the religious life. What does voluntary poverty mean when one has been forced to live in poverty all his or her life? What does poverty mean when one has more money or comfort in the religious community than his or her family in the village? What does obedience mean for someone who belongs to a culture where after all one never decides on his or her own?

And so, disorder in religious Orders. The point here is that multi-cultural membership creates disorder in religious Orders, or at least, disturbs the normal order.

(b) Multi-directional Mission

There is still another phenomenon – closely related to multi-culturality – which creates disorder in religious Orders, especially in specifically missionary congregations. In the past, missionaries moved from Christian Europe to the rest of the non-Christian World in America, Africa, Asia, Oceania. Christian mission was about the White missionary who went to far away lands and lived among the natives, largely people of colour – black, brown, yellow, red. They claimed to bring the Gospel of Jesus, but unconsciously also carried along what was viewed as a superior culture, buttressed by advanced scientific knowledge and developed technology. At a certain period in the history of Christian mission, missionaries came "on the coat-tails of the colonizers", in such a way that often it was difficult to distinguish between missionary activity and colonial rule. At this time, then, mission was an "orderly", one-way movement from West to East, from North to South, or from the center to the periphery.

In recent years, however, this "order" has been disturbed. For today, in many missionary congregations, most missionaries originate no longer from Europe but from Asia, Africa and Latin America. This is certainly the case in the SVD and the SSpS. In the SVD, this turn of events began to take place in a rather massive way around the beginning of the 1980's, when what used to be "mission-receiving" Provinces began to regularly send missionaries to other parts of the world. This was reinforced by what is known in the SVD as the "Roscommon

Consensus", i.e., the statement of the Provincial Superiors of the European zone gathered in Roscommon (Ireland) in 1990 which declared secularized Europe also to be a "mission territory" analogous to the mission situations in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Thus, it was felt that Europe also had the right to ask for and receive missionaries from elsewhere.

Thus, to date, we now have some 600 Asian SVD missionaries working outside their own countries in Europe, the U.S., Latin America, Africa, Oceania and other parts of Asia. Similarly, but on a smaller scale, we have around 50 African SVD missionaries working outside Africa, and about the same number of Latin American SVD missionaries working outside Latin America. It should be noted that this is not only a question of what is sometimes called "reverse mission" – that is, missionaries from the former mission territories going as missionaries to Europe. For missionaries from the South also go as missionaries to Asia, Africa and Latin America. Thus, we also speak today of a "South-to-South" mission, in contrast to the earlier situation where mission was largely a "North-to-South" phenomenon.

Thus, from an "orderly" one-way movement from North to South, mission has become what appears to be a "disorderly" multi-directional movement, or even a "chaotic" movement from all directions and to all directions – South to North, South to South, East to West, East to East, periphery to centre, periphery to periphery. In other words, the Church is no longer neatly divided into the "missionary church" here and the "mission churches" there. Just as the world is no longer neatly divided into the centre of faith and the periphery of unbelief, with the "People of God" here and the "*gentes*" (or the "pagan" nations) there. For, today, there are also "*gentes*" here and "People of God" there. Today, we speak of mission on all five continents. Mission has become multi-directional – a movement from all directions and to all directions.

This creates "disorder" in missionary Orders.

- Once I was sharing with another Superior General about the internationality of the SVD. And I said that because of our internationality, we have instances like a Fijian OTP student in Romania, a Vanuatuan new priest in Cuba, and an Indonesian confrère in Siberia. And he said: "That's interesting" – which, I thought, was his polite way of saying: "That's funny! What connection does a Fijian have with Romania, or the Vanuatuan with Cuba and the Indonesian with Siberia?". Then he said: "Tell me more about the Indonesian in Siberia. What does he do there? How does he survive the cold?".

- On another occasion, I had the opportunity of visiting our parish in Oriximiná in the Amazon Region in Brazil. There in the town cemetery a young Indian confrère is buried. This young confrère had come to the Amazon to do the OTP (Overseas Training Programme). Shortly after arriving, he drowned while taking a swim in the river. As I stood there and prayed for this young confrère, I thought about how "lonely" his tomb appeared. He is most probably the only Indian, and so far the only SVD, buried in that cemetery. His family and relatives are so far away in India. Probably, none of them will ever be able to visit his tomb. And so the question dawned on me – a question so often asked of me in gatherings of Superiors General – why send missionaries from non-Christian countries to Catholic Countries in Latin America? Should they not rather remain in their own countries and evangelize the "*gentes*" there?

- Or, consider the change of image of the missionary. If, in the past, Western missionaries came side by side the colonizer, today's missionaries from Asia, Africa and Latin America come alongside the migrant worker. Like the colonizer, Western missionaries in the past came to give. Today, like the migrant worker, Third World missionaries are sometimes looked upon as coming to take. In the past, Western missionaries came with shipping containers full of things to give. Today, Third World missionaries come with empty hands with nothing to offer in the material sense. Thus, from mission out of one's abundance (if not one's own, at least of one's country) to mission out of one's poverty (certainly one's own, as well as of one's country).

And so, disorder in missionary Orders. Multi-directional mission creates disorder in mission, or at least, disturbs the normal order.

2. Wisdom From Disorder

So, what can we learn from this disorder in religious Orders caused by multi-cultural membership and multi-directional mission? Let me now move on to the second step of this talk, that is, a reflection on "wisdom from disorder".

I believe disorder makes us realize that things do not have to be the way they are, that things can be different, that there can be a new order of things. Disorder allows us to free ourselves from the stagnating weight of the way things are and permits us to see new possibilities hidden in the present order of things, and waiting to be allowed to emerge fully. Disorder gives us a sense that there is such a thing as a "new heaven and a new earth".

Thus, there is wisdom in disorder – from which we can learn many things. Allow me to underline just three basic things. *About God*, about *religious life*, and about *mission*. That is, the folly of divine love, the folly of religious consecration, and the folly of cross-cultural mission.

2.1. God: The Folly of Self-emptying Love

The first verses of Genesis tell how God created the world. God's Spirit hovered over the formless void, and order was created out of disorder, cosmos out of chaos. For the first human beings, however, this order was not good enough. They wanted to be gods themselves and create their own order. They built Babel and installed that as the order of the world. Since then the order of the world has been one great disorder and confusion. And God's saving plan has been to subvert this order and restore the original order created by his Word.

IMAGE OF THE CRUCIFIED DONKEY

This ancient graffiti was originally found etched on a plaster wall in the Roman Forum. It depicts a crucified man with a donkey's head. The Greek caption reads: *Alexamenos sebete theon* (Alexamenos worships his god).

A few scholars see it as a historical clue to some cultic movement that was taking place during the early second century and linking Jesus (the crucified) with Bacchus or Dionysus (the donkey's head). But a wider consensus believes it to be a caricature teasing a friend or colleague (named Alexamenos) for having converted to the Christian faith then spreading underground throughout the Roman Empire. If so, it substantiates what St Paul wrote about the members of the primitive Church being scorned as 'fools for Christ' (I Cor 4:10).

Human beings wanting to be like God is the height of presumption. In the Psalms God mocks them and all those who consider themselves important or mighty. Psalm 2:2 says: "Kings on earth rise up and princes plot together against the LORD and his anointed: 'Let us break their shackles and cast off their chains!'". The one enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord derides them, then speaks to them in anger, terrifies them in wrath: "I myself have installed my king on Zion, upon my holy mountain" (Ps 2:2-4).

To counter the human beings' desire to be God, God himself became human in Jesus Christ – as if to say that the way to salvation is not through power and might and wealth, normally connected with being God, but though humility and lowliness and poverty, basic characteristics of being human. By doing so, God re-defined what being God means – not the fullness of mighty power, but self-emptying love (Phil 2:6-8).

So, God reveals himself not to "the wise and the learned but to children" (Mt 11:25). Indeed, he chooses "the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and chooses the weak of the world to shame the strong; he chooses the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (I Cor 1:27-28,25).

He chose to be born of a young virgin, poor and uneducated, politically insignificant. But through her, God would disperse the arrogant of mind and heart, throw down the mighty from their thrones and raise up the lowly, fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty (Lk 1:51-53).

To those who wish to be his disciples, he says: "whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 10:38-39). Those who are truly happy are not those who are mighty and rich, but those who are poor, meek, merciful, clean of heart, peacemakers, persecuted for the sake of righteousness (Mt 5:3-10). And only those who become like little children will enter his kingdom (Mt 18:3). For the one "exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk 18:14).

Eventually he became a threat to the powers of this world. He had to be eliminated from this world in order to subvert the present order of things. The Messiah on the Cross is the ultimate incongruity of salvation history. But it is also the ultimate act of self-emptying love.

With God nailed to it, the Cross is turned from being a symbol of shame and punishment to being a sign of salvation and hope. Indeed, as St Paul puts it:

> The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.... Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength (*cf.* I Cor 1:18,22-25).

2.2. Religious Life: The Folly of Whole-hearted Consecration

According to standard ecclesiology, the consecrated life does not belong to the "hierarchical order" of the Church, i.e., the Pope, bishops, priests, the laity. As we know, both clerics and lay can be part of the consecrated life. Religious do not form another "order" in the hierarchy of the Church between the ordained clergy and the unordained laity. Rather, the consecrated life belongs to the so-called "charismatic structure" of the Church.

"Charismatic structure" is somewhat of a misnomer, a "contradiction in terms", since charisms

usually defy structure and ordering. According to St Paul in I Cor 12, charisms are various gifts which the Spirit freely distributes for the building up of the Church. Charisms, then, imply spontaneity, plurality, diversity. This diversity is essential to the Church as the body of Christ. As St Paul puts it: " Now the body is not a single part, but many (I Cor 12:14); if they were all one part, where would the body be?" (*v.* 19). It is in this context that we can speak of the various forms of religious life as giving shape to the various charisms of the Spirit. Through the Founders of religious congregations, the gifts of the Spirit are called forth in response to the various needs of the Church.

In I Cor 13, however, St Paul explains that the "more excellent" charism is love. Love never fails. The gifts of prophecy, of tongues, of knowledge will pass away. In the end, faith, hope and love will remain; and the greatest of these is love. This highest of all charisms also forms the foundation of religious life. For the consecration entailed in religious life is a consecration of one's entire self to God – that is, in the words of Deuteronomy (Dt 6:5), a consecration that entails "loving God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength". This is expressed in the three vows of chastity (loving God with all one's heart), obedience (loving God with all one's soul or mind), and poverty (loving God with all one's strength).

Religious life is, therefore, a radical following of Jesus, the Son of God made man – chaste, poor and obedient. In doing so, the consecrated person makes God his/her true wealth, his/her only love and his/her genuine freedom. The consecrated person commits him/herself to living in the present the values of the future kingdom of God. Thus, the consecrated person provides a counter-cultural witness, proclaiming that God's Kingdom entails overturning the order of the world. There is, therefore, a prophetic dimension to the Evangelical Counsels. For poverty, chastity and obedience appear incongruous in a world which values the power to own and possess, the need for exclusive intimacy, and the freedom to regulate one's life.

From the perspective of the world, consecrated persons appear as "fools for the sake of Christ". As St Paul puts it:

> We have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and human beings alike. We are fools on Christ's account.... We have become like the world's rubbish, the scum of all, to this very moment (I Cor 4:9-10,13).
>
> Part of consecrated life has, therefore, what we might call a "destabilizing character", or a capacity for disorder. Thus, disorder should never be foreign to Religious Orders. And only by preserving such a character will religious be able to give witness to the eschatological order of God's Kingdom.

2.3. Mission: The Folly of Cross-cultural Witness

Traditionally, the biblical basis for the missionary activity of the Church is Mt 28:19-20 – "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations ....". The missionary task of the Church is based on the conviction about the universal significance of Jesus Christ. The conviction is that the Gospel of Jesus is Good News not only for its original hearers in the Mediterranean world or in Europe where Christianity grew and developed rapidly, but also for people of other times and places, of other generations and cultures. The proclamation of the Gospel across cultures is therefore seen as a Christian imperative. In this sense, mission, by its very nature, is cross-cultural.

Missionaries of the past and the present are fired by their personal experience of the Gospel of Jesus as Good News. Because of this, they leave behind the familiar (home, country, culture) and set out for the unfamiliar in order to share this Good News with other people. There was a certain madness, a certain fool-hardiness in this. For there was never a certainty that they would be welcomed and their message accepted. In fact, in many cases, missionaries were not welcome and their message was rejected, thereby experiencing untold suffering and hardship, and even death. In some cases, missionaries were seen as invaders and colonizers, impostors and soul-stealers. But, in many other cases, missionaries were also received as genuine friends and benefactors, respected teachers and ministers, trusted pastors and spiritual guides.

St Francis Xavier, one of the patrons of mission, once wrote:

> Very many out here fail to become Christians simply because there is nobody available to make them Christians. I have very often had the notion to go round the universities of Europe, and especially Paris, and to shout aloud everywhere like a madman, and to bludgeon those people who have more learning than love, with these words, "Alas, what an immense number of souls are excluded from heaven through your fault and thrust down to hell!".[5]

We may have reservations about the theological vision behind this statement, but it alludes to a certain madness in cross-cultural mission.

Recent theological reflection has underlined even more strongly the cross-cultural character of mission. In line with the theological vision of Vatican II, the foundation of mission is seen as the dialogue of love which is at the heart of the Trinity. This inner dialogue between Father, Son and Holy Spirit overflows into the world through the mission of the Word and the sending of the Spirit. The Incarnation of the Son of God entails a passing over from the realm of the divinity to the world of humanity, a border-crossing not just between different cultures but between different worlds. Divine love did not remain within the divinity. It passed on to what was different from it. This passing over to another realm, this border-crossing, is a manifestation of the gratuitousness of God's love.

This gratuitousness is brought out clearly by cross-cultural mission. Indeed, if mission were confined to one's own culture or world, something essential would be lost in mission. If missionaries were to work only in their own culture or country, one could suspect that they are motivated by the human ties that bind them with their people. But to work in another culture or country? No human ties would explain that, but only the experience of the beauty of the Gospel which proclaims that God is love. As one missionary once wrote in his memoirs: "How was it that I should be listening to night crickets and wading through swamps in an African forest to help a dying human being I had never known?".[6]

No human ties could explain that. Only the Gospel of Jesus. *Caritas Christi urget nos*. This is the folly of cross-cultural mission.

3. Forming Inter-cultural Communities

Let me now pass on to the third step of this talk, and suggest a few ideas about forming inter-cultural communities. Here I will limit myself to three short points.

3.1. Theological motive

First of all, it should be clear that we form international or inter-cultural communities for a theological purpose, that is, to provide a witness to the unity and diversity of the Kingdom of God. We form international or inter-cultural communities not simply because we like it, or because it is nice (because, in fact, quite often it is not nice!), or because we want to imitate the United Nations. Neither do we form international or inter-cultural communities because we are compelled to accept members from other continents due to the dearth of vocations in the West. Rather we form international or inter-cultural communities because we are called to witness both to the universality of God's Kingdom and its openness to diversity. This witness is especially urgent in the context of globalization which tends, on one hand, to exclude and, on the other, to eliminate all differences. In view of this, there is a particular need today to witness that God's Kingdom is a kingdom of love that includes absolutely everyone and, at the same time, is open to the particularity of every person and people.

3.2. Intentional community

Secondly, it follows from the first point that international or inter-cultural communities need to be *intentional communities*. In other words, it is essential that members consciously intend

to be an international or inter-cultural community for a specific purpose. Each member needs to be convinced that internationality or inter-culturality is an ideal to be sought after or a value to be promoted. International or inter-cultural communities do not just happen by chance, or by simply putting together under the same roof people of different nations or cultures. Rather, true international or inter-cultural communities need to be consciously created, intentionally promoted, carefully cared for and attentively nurtured. They require some basic personal attitudes, certain community structures, and a particular spirituality. Consequently, members need a specific programme of formation, both initial and ongoing, which prepares them to live effectively and meaningfully in international or inter-cultural communities.

3.3. Interaction among cultures

Thirdly, I believe our ideal is not just a community composed of people from different nationalities or cultures – this is what is normally described by the term "internationality". Nor is it simply a community where people of different cultures or nationalities can co-exist side by side – this is what is expressed by the term "multi-culturality". Our ideal is a community where the different cultures of the members can interact with each other and thereby mutually enrich the individual members and the community as a whole – this is what would be designated by the term "inter-culturality". A genuine inter-cultural community is characterized by three things[7], namely: (1) the recognition of other cultures (i.e., allowing minority cultures to be visible in the community), (2) respect for cultural difference (i.e., avoiding any attempt to level off cultural differences by subsuming the minority cultures into the dominant culture), and (3) the promotion of a healthy interaction between cultures (i.e., seeking to create a climate whereby each culture allows itself to be transformed or enriched by the other). In this way, an inter-cultural community will be one where members from different cultures will feel they belong.

In the end, perhaps we can liken cultures with the charisms about which St Paul speaks in I Cor 12. Paraphrasing Paul we can then say:

> The genuine religious missionary community is not a single culture, but many. If it were all one culture, where would the community be? But as it is, there are many cultures, yet one community. Indeed, the cultures that seem to be weaker are all the more necessary, and those cultures that we consider less honourable we surround with greater honour, and are treated with greater propriety, whereas the more presentable cultures do not need this. But God has so constructed the community as to give greater honour to the culture that is without it. If one culture suffers, all the others suffer with it; if one culture is honoured, all the others share its joy (*cf.* I Cor 12:14-26).

4. Conclusion

Let me conclude with a word on the Saints in whose memory we are holding this symposium, St Arnold Janssen, our Founder, and St Joseph Freinademetz, our pioneer missionary to China. Two men who are now saints because they were fools for Christ's sake.

In 1905, as Arnold Janssen was deciding whether or not to accept mission work among the Afro-Americans in the United States, he wrote:

> Sometimes it happens that we succeed in something which the great majority consider to be hopeless. We have experienced that here in Steyl. At that time I was considered eccentric and almost crazy; still I continued to hope and, with God's help, I was successful.[8]

And from Joseph Freinademetz, we read the following from two of his letters from China:

> I myself am also nailed to the cross. The way things are here, who knows if we would still be alive when this letter reaches you .... there is great persecution by the pagans ... and if we escaped death today, who knows if we would escape it also tomorrow .... but we place all our trust in God who certainly will not abandon us [1887].[9]

> Last year we had a great persecution which cost the life of many Christians .... Until now the Lord has always protected us. The mission continues with the grace of God [1895].[10]

From these citations we sense a certain "light-heartedness" in the face of important decisions to make or grave situations in the mission. Or even perhaps a tinge of humour, which relativizes their self-importance in the awareness that it is God who is in control. It is said that humility is the foundation of humour,[11] for humility gives us a true sense of our self-worth and leads us to the realization of our smallness before the greatness of God. Only the truly humble person can acknowledge God's actions in the world as "*mirabilia Dei*" – wonderful works of God.

What we see, then, in these citations is the humility of both Arnold and Joseph, which gives them a sense of humour and an unshakeable trust in God. May we learn from both Saints that we are not indispensable in mission, that mission is God's and not ours. May we learn from them that we are not the main protagonists in mission, that we are only collaborators. Or, as the words attributed to Archbishop Oscar Romero put it, "We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future that is not our own". It may seem folly to give one's whole life to such a future. But if it is God's future, then it can only be "holy folly".

Notes

[1] "Religious Orders" are religious institutes whose members profess "solemn vows", while "religious congregations" are religious institutes whose members profess "simple vows". This terminology is typically of the Latin Rite. In the Oriental Rite, the distinction is between "major vows" and "minor vows". Solemn vows are professed by those in independent monasteries in the Latin Rite and all monastic and certain non-monastic institutes in the Oriental Rite. Simple vows are professed by those in all congregations in the Latin Rite and all non-monastic institutes in the Oriental Rite. Simple vows may be perpetual or temporary. Solemn vows are always perpetual. They are vows which make any attempt at marriage invalid. *Cf.* L.A. Voegtle, "Religious Profession, Canon Law of" in *New Catholic Encyclopedia,* Vol. XII (NY: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967). In the Latin Rite, the older religious institutes are "Orders" – usually monastic Orders (like the Benedictines or Augustinians, Camaldolese or Carthusians) or mendicant orders (like the Franciscans or Dominicans), while the more recent religious institutes are usually "congregations". Happily for us, today, these distinctions are no longer as important as they were in the past. In fact, they do not appear anymore in the new Code of Canon Law (1983).

[2] *Cf. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Massachussetts: G.&C. Merriam Company, 1979).

[3] *Cf. Webster's New World Dictionary*, Second College Edition (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1986).

[4] Carlos Pape, "Esperienza di internazionalità nella Congregazione del Verbo Divino", *Il Verbo nel Mondo 2001-2002*, (Steyl: Editrice Steyl, 2002), p. 11.

[5] St Francis Xavier, Bk 4, Letters 4 and 5, in "Office of Readings", 3 December, *Divine Office* (London: Collins, 1974), p. 12*.

[6] *Cf.* Thomas O'Shaughnessy, *Rest Your Head in Your Hand*, quoted by Patrick Noonan, "From Soul Catcher to Adventurer", *The Tablet*, 21 October 2006, p. 4.

[7] *Cf.* Robert Schreiter, "Ministry for a Multicultural Church", (http://www.sedos.org, Articles in English).

[8] Arnold Janssen, in Josef Alt, *Journey of Faith: The Missionary Life of Arnold Janssen* (trans. by Frank Mansfield and Jacqueline Mulberge*)*, Analecta SVD 85 (Rome: Collegio Verbo Divino, 2002), p. 83.

[9] Giuseppe Freinademetz, *Lettere di un Santo*, a cura di Pietro Irsara (Bolzano: Imprexa, [no year]), Lettera 28, p. 53. Translation mine.

[10] Giuseppe Freinademetz, *Lettere di un Santo*, Lettera 48, p. 75. Translation mine.

[11] *Cf.* Gerald Arbuckle, *Refounding and Religious Life*, Chapter 3 (Keeping One's Balance: Humour and Religious Life).

Ref.: Text from the author, December 2008.

Judith Vallimont, SSPs

Panel Response to:

"Comedy and Missionary Communion ..."

by Antonio Pernia, SVD

OVERVIEW

To begin with, I thank you, Fr Pernia, for your insightful and thought-provoking presentation on Mission as Holy Folly: Comedy and Missionary Communion. Yours was the challenging question: "What wisdom can religious congregations reap from living through the drama of forming multi-cultural communities?". I expand this question to include what wisdom do we share in mission with a multicultural world? The Latin American scheme you used – the basis for liberation theology and for theological reflection – of see, judge, and act – creates an order to your presentation. This helps make sense of a topic that otherwise seems rooted in folly: How foolish for us to try to create order (communion) amidst such diversity!

SEE

You spoke to us of the ORDER of the past – particularly the period up until Vatican II. It all seemed so logical, so natural. To be a true religious is to be "like me". You clearly identified ways this happened. I want to point out that this unconscious attitude permeated not only how we understood and lived religious life, but how we understood and lived "being Catholic". The style of religious life and of being Catholic was rooted in a Western European way of thinking and behaving.

Now, as multi-cultural realities form the substructure of our religious life, we can no longer follow what seemed so natural. We reached your second moment with Vatican II. We began speaking of inculturation, of local Church, of enriching and being enriched by others. We acknowledged there is richness in diversity. We sought to incorporate diversity into our way of being. What a holy disorder we created! We no longer have "common food", common ways of dressing, common music for our liturgies.

You pointed out well the difficulties in understanding vowed life: Poverty in the midst of real poverty or amid plenty; obedience in cultures where the individual makes decisions or where the individual makes no decisions. I add to these chastity in cultures where marriage and having children is the norm or where sexual gratification comes before self discipline. How do we live the holy folly of the vows in these situations?

We also have the diversity of our understanding of mission. You drew our attention to the change we are experiencing in what we call "reverse mission". Places to which we went as missionaries, are now sending missionaries. Sending countries are receiving; receiving countries are sending. The world is mission. **Three dominant themes result from this change**.

One is our understanding of what it means to be in mission in community. I emphasize how concern for personal giftedness and personal response to mission competes with our call to live mission in community, to see we are in mission together. It is not my mission; it isn't

even a SSpS mission. It is God's mission as lived and experienced in community – bringing the best I have to offer. We are together in mission.

A second theme is the move away from "CONVERTING" – from making others into "Euro-Catholics" or ROMAN Catholic. We work with the indigenous people transforming them and ourselves into true followers of Jesus. We do not bring a Roman Catholic God to others. We reveal the light of hope. We share experiences of the divine.

In a workshop I was facilitating some years ago, a woman said: "The God I teach in my catechism class is not the God I talk to at home". I asked her to explain what she meant. Her explanation: "The God I teach in catechism is the Catholic God – one who is always watching and judging, one who catches you and punishes you. The God I talk to is one who understands how hard my life is. I can cry to him about my kids on drugs. I know He won't punish me. He helps me and he'll help my kids ..." .

Who have we, as missionaries, as Church, told people God is? How do we, together, see God and God's movements in our different cultures? Yes, we now realize our mission is to proclaim hope, to be hope. It is not to change cultures but to shed the light of the Gospel on all of them.

The third theme is that mission – being a Gospel presence – is intimately connected with justice. Mission is recognizing the dignity of all humans, of all creation; it is to be as Jesus is – one who identifies with the marginalized as he recognized their personhood and healed their spirit.

JUDGE

This leads us to the "judging" step you presented, Fr Tony. As you said, "Disorder allows us to free ourselves from the stagnating weight of the way things are". Disorder "permits us to see new possibilities ...". Disorder lets us wait until something new emerges. Yes, there is wisdom in disorder for it opens us to the surprise of the Spirit, to the folly of God's love.

These surprises or new possibilities do not lie in our making a perfect and orderly universe. They lie in our accepting fully the beauty of each other, the beauty of created being. This is the Gospel message: "And the light came into the world and the world did not comprehend it". (Jn 1:5) The world is still in chaos. It is folly to think we can bring together diverse peoples, create a new order, simply by accepting the differences.

God became fully other, fully human, but did not lose the identity of being God. Ours is to bring Gospel hope and joy. Our mission is to BE Gospel hope and joy by truly changing, without losing our true identity. To be in mission is to change our way of seeing the world; to understand there are many ways of experiencing God. It is to recognize there are many languages and symbols through which God-experiences can be shared.

Ours is the challenge of hope, of being a Gospel presence of justice. We are well aware that we cannot preach love with words alone. It is done by our integrity as persons. In the well-known saying, it is for us to "practice (LIVE) what we preach". And it is this integrity that ties us to social justice, to our commitment to respect life in all its forms, to our commitment to work for justice at the individual and systemic levels.

Vowed poverty, chastity, and obedience are truly incongruous in a world that values power, possessions, and freedom from interpersonal commitment. In your words, Fr Tony, consecrated life has a "destabilizing character, a capacity for disorder" for it is counter to so much that seems to be valued in so many cultures. And the cross cultural character we give to the vows through our intercultural communities is seen by many as the ultimate of foolishness. In a time when commitment is taken so lightly, it is hard for others to see that we CAN live together in peace and love.

ACT

This brings us to the third perspective of the Latin American scheme: Act. You made it very clear that we form international or intercultural communities INTENTIONALLY for a theological purpose. We do this to provide witness to the unity and diversity of the Kingdom of God, not just to have something to brag about. We witness to God's love for all at the real level of community, of daily rubbing together. We cannot simply be many faces. We are to work at being one heart. THIS is our charism.

I declare our challenge is to go beyond the recognition of other cultures, respect for cultural differences, and the promotion of healthy interaction. Ours is to see deeply into the reality of God present everywhere, to contemplate this presence and to know that each of us present here – you, and me – as beautiful and good as we can possibly be at this moment. And each one of us present here is called to unfold his/her inner beauty, that is God, to one another. St Paul calls us to "put on the mind of Christ". This includes putting on the mind of each other, of looking at Creation through the eyes of the other, of valuing life through the experiences and longings of the other.

Gerald Arbuckle, a well-known anthropologist said during a workshop in the U.S. that "culture is insidious". We can absorb aspects of it that are counter gospel without realizing it. Consumerism and narcissism and other undesirable qualities – we could sum these up in what is called the comfort culture – are becoming more and more part of everyone's culture including that of our missionary communities. What does the Gospel we proclaim say to all of this? What does our life in intercultural community say?

CONCLUSION

Seeking to be of one heart, one spirit, with many faces may seem folly, a silly ideal. Yet we know it is not impossible because God became totally other. God became human. In your concluding comments, Fr Tony, you mention the "tinge of humour which relativizes their (our) self-importance in the awareness that it is God who is in control". So we dress differently, talk funny, eat weird food, look different. Yet we seek to be of one heart. God is in control.

Missionary communion goes deep. It is love of the other as she/he is. It is transforming and being transformed. It is knowing and accepting the reality that living real community life is living in the struggle. It is living at peace in the chaos of differences. It is respecting with love the reality that all are different yet all bear the markings of the one Spirit. It is growing through the struggle to realize in the words of Scripture: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female" (*cf.* Gal 3:28). "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made one in the Spirit" (*cf.* I Cor 12:13). "In that renewal there is no dinstiction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and is in all!" (*cf.* Col 3:11).

So I return to your initial question, Fr Tony: "What wisdom can religious congregations reap from living through the drama of forming multi-cultural communities?". It is the wisdom of knowing that living our oneness in the Spirit is a struggle of imperfections, of Creation groaning to become all it can be. It is the wisdom of living in peace amidst the chaos of being different: Many faces, one heart.

Mary John Kudiyirippil, SSpS

SUMMING UP

The Context

The Symposium on Mission was conducted to mark the 100th anniversary of the death of two Saints – Arnold Janssen and Joseph Freinadmetz – Founder of three Congregations, and First SVD missionary to China respectively. The Symposium was *in honour of* the Saints – though not about them, but about mission.

The themes of c*ontemplation*, c*ompassion* and *communion* divided an otherwise vast subject into three concrete and fruitful ways of being in mission. Contemplation is an outlook and disposition that nurture compassion and communion. Compassion is the concrete outward sign and fruit of living contemplation and communion. Communion is the end result of contemplation and compassion in one's interior which binds and connects one with the other.

Why Comedy?

Why should anyone think, much less talk about comedy in relation to mission? What has humour and laughter got to do with reflecting on our personal or collective mission stories?

"Humility is the foundation of humour" said Sr Burke, the second main Speaker. Only the humble and the detached can see the humorous side of things. By 'detached' is meant a quality that enables a person to rise above the direct and immediate needs of everyday routine and to look at life from an impassioned stance of wisdom and proportion. Contrary to the commonly held idea that comedy is superficial and silly, it can be, and indeed is, a sign of life lived more reflectively. Recognizing life's incongruities has a 'freeing' effect. It helps us cope with the ironies of life.

Recently I have personally witnessed glimpses of the comic aspect of an otherwise super tragedy. The whole episode of the loss of my passport and the consequent troubles could only be endured with a comic touch. All of my experiences in this regard at the concerned embassies were either frustrating or comic, often both. How else would one understand, for example, a fax from one esteemed embassy to another equally worthy one that read: "*I have the honour* {*sic!*} *of reporting the loss of the passport of Sr Mary John in our possession?*". Or, after three long months of waiting, the same embassy told me: *"You are on our priority list*!".

Comedy and Contemplation

Fr Nestor Schwerz, OFM, started by stating that contemplation is not an intellectual exercise or rational thinking on God but an act of the heart. He briefly traced the history of contemplation in the Church's rich monastic traditions. Although his paper did not bring out the aspect of comedy, it pointed out the incongruities between our claimed God-experience and the proportionate outcome in real life.

Some one has defined contemplation as 'a long, loving look'…

• ***Long*** – because it, sort of, suspends time for the contemplator. It has an aspect of 'being

lost'. Contemplation is not done in a hurry, within a set agenda or deadline. *Long* because through repeated acts it becomes a habit.

• ***Loving*** – because it goes directly to the heart of the matter. It is an exercise of the heart and is accompanied by feelings of love, wonder, reverence, gratitude and humility. It makes the contemplator kind, grateful and humble towards all humanity.

• ***Look*** – because contemplation presupposes the use of the senses and alertness to our surroundings. It endows the contemplator with perception, vision and insight. Attentive to what is happening around him/her, the contemplator picks up the vibrations which enable him/her to see the whole in a piece and a piece in the whole. In other words, contemplation is not something that is hanging up there in the air. It happens in our encounter with the created world in time and space.

Comedy and Compassion

Sr Maria Burke, SSpS, spoke from the richness of experience that came from the years she spent in the bush in Papua New Guinea. "Laughter softens the pain of our own shortcomings", she said. Humour makes us accept and cope better with frustrations by providing us with escape routes. Compassion as a process sets in motion a series of acts of love and solidarity consciously taken. Through various experiences and from various humourous angles, she showed how life could be joyful and even funny in the remotest corners of a little explored island.

Comedy and Communion

Communion is feeling interconnected and united in a real way. It is like the undercurrent that moves and touches the deepest core without creating ripples on the surface. Communion is invisible to the eye, but that does not make it any less real. Indeed it is as real as the pull a kite holder feels as the kite soars into invisible space. To have communion one need not be physically present to another; it is a movement of the spirit reaching out to the other in love and warmth.

Fr Antonio Pernia, SVD, asserted that given our differences of personality and temperament (to say nothing of culture yet), communion may not always be possible in religious communities. However, for an effective missionary presence, it is necessary that we make intentional and painstaking efforts to create communion among ourselves.

Intercultural living provides one valuable avenue for living out the comic aspect of life.

Through a play on words, Fr Pernia pointed out the disorder in religious communities even in areas where we least expect it to exist like rules, uniformity, values and mission. The divine comedy is being enacted and re-enacted each time we open ourselves to new and different ways of being Church, being community and being in mission.

The three subsequent responses then gave a creative, learned and gracious appreciation of and feedback on each of the presentations. Besides synthesizing the core points of the respective Speakers, they unearthed new aspects of the topic with their own contributions. Funny intervals were provided by video clips from some classic films of profound import which pepped up the serious occasion with communal music and laughter.

To read more .....

Michael Somers, SVD

Profile of a Mission-Hearted Founder

"Prophetic dialogue entails a recovery of what is characteristically an SVD way of doing mission". 16th SVD General Chapter (2006)

At times one can get the impression that 'prophetic dialogue' is a totally new concept and a new 'cool' word to describe our mission charism today. Yet when we look more closely at the life and work of Arnold Janssen we find him to be a model of prophetic dialogue in different ways.

Interior Dialogue. Fr Arnold was in touch with himself, aware of his rough character and difficult personality. The sting in his personality put at risk relationships and friendships. When his secretary mentioned to him some critical remarks and comments made about him, he asked Fr Gierto write down the comments he heard. Little did he think that Fr Gier would take him seriously. But a few weeks later he handed Fr Arnold 54 small pages of negative criticisms. Fr Arnold made special efforts to improve. He prayed each day after Mass for "the grace to understand how a wise father or the heart of a mother ought to be towards his/her subjects" (J. Reuter, *Proclaiming the Word in the Power of the Spirit,* pp. 71-72).

Arnold elicited admiration, but he also evoked antagonism. He disturbed many; and frequently this happened through apparently contradictory behaviour, rather than through preached word or inspirational action. Poorly equipped for the task ahead, Fr Arnold touched painfully the reality of who he was: His great desire to share God's love with all people contradicted his obvious talents. In his inner struggles he touched deeply his humanity in his weaknesses and limitations, yet he set out into deeper waters. Arnold allowed himself to be vulnerable, rid himself of all defenses and opened himself to the possibility of ridicule and failure, of being disarmed of personal pride, being hurt, rejected and misunderstood. He surrendered himself in dialogue with the Word.

Dialogue with Others. Fr Arnold read the signs of the times in a provocatively challenging and disturbing way. He had the inner freedom to listen deeply and the outer initiative to respond in new and fresh ways. Through the *Kulturkampf that* made the German Church turn inwards in self-defence, Arnold perceived the Spirit prompting it to look outwards to the needs of the wider world. This led him to open the first German/Dutch mission house. "We live in a time when much is collapsing and new things must be established in their place" (*Arnold Janssen to Archbishop Melchers of Cologne*, 1875).

Arnold showed his enthusiasm for languages and cultures in the way he responded to requests from new mission countries. His secretary recalled how he would spread encyclopaedias and maps over the floor in order to learn all he could about the country and culture from where the request came. In his vulnerability, Arnold could choose freely: to be open to others, no matter who that other was, to stand firm in his convictions amid controversy, to risk his voice or action even though there was the possibility of being misunderstood, rejected, or laughed at even among his own, to share his faith and vision even though he might be questioned or criticized, to risk failure, thus discovering his gift-edness and potential.

Dialogue with Creation. As a teacher of natural science Fr Arnold discovered God in all things and beings and all things in God: "In spring we see how the plants, beautifully formed, sprout from the dark, dirty soil and soon stand before us in all their colourful beauty and with sparkling, affectionate eyes gaze at us like messengers from God. Where do they come from? The finger of God, the Holy Spirit, is at work here".

Awareness of God's presence and openness to the Spirit is the key to his spirituality, for at the core of Fr. Arnold's spirituality lay the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. This was the basis of his union with God, his love for people, and his missionary enthusiasm. It involved every aspect of his life and became a deeply personal relationship to God as Father, Son and Spirit; "we in God and God in us". The thousands of letters that he wrote speak for themselves; he remained close to all his sisters and brothers in the missions and supported them constantly. "Obviously the 'spirit of the Founder' is profoundly Trinitarian. It is rooted in the Founder's great devotion to the Holy Trinity. For, the dialogue of life and love within the Trinity is the giving of one's all to the other" ('A Word from Fr General', *Arnoldus Nota:* Jan/Feb 2007).

Dialogue with God. When weary of life, Arnold sat down by the well of life and in moments of intimacy and prayer God became his rock, his meaning, his courage, his all in all. "Meditative prayer is not a time of sterile, cold reflection; rather it should be a heartfelt, loving dialogue with God." He discovered that only in unshakable trust and total surrender into the hands of God could his impossible dream become a reality.

In those vulnerable, yet graced moments, Arnold faithfully used the potential that God had invested in him, never counting the cost. His weaknesses became his strengths and today we are gifted by the ordinariness of this man. Most importantly, to be vulnerable is to know the paradoxical power in surrendering ourselves to God. It is to allow the power of God's Spirit to take over and to move through us. It is to know that by ourselves we can do nothing, but with a surrendering heart we can do all things in the one who wishes to grace us every moment of our lives, so that we can become a blessing for others as Arnold has become for each one of us.

St Arnold Janssen
1837-1909
Founder of the SVD, SSpS, and SSpSPA

St ARNOLD JANSSEN went around asking for help to found a formation house for foreign missionaries. His project seemed so funny to the clerical leaders of his time that they remarked:

- Fr Fugmann (curate in Kempis) sarcastically: 'Go ahead, you have all that it takes. Firstly you are stubborn, then you are pious, lastly you are impractical enough'.

- Bishop Paredis of Roermond: 'Fr Janssen, chaplain of the Ursulines in Kempen, came to see me. He wants to found a mission house ... and yet he has nothing! He is either a saint or a fool'.

- Archbishop Melchers of Cologne: 'We live in a time when everything is shaking and sinking … and you want to start something new?'. Fr Arnold replied: 'It is because we live in a time when much is collapsing and new things must be established in their place'.

Pietro Irsara, SVD

Model of Missionary Conversion

"The greatest task of a missionary is the transformation of one's inner self".
St Joseph Freinademetz

The hamlet of Oies where Joseph Freinademetz was born on 12 April 1852 lies in the heart of the Dolomites in the Gader Valley (Val Badia). It was on the small family farm 1,500 meters high that little 'Ujop', as he was called in his mother tongue Ladin, learned to pray and to work. There he grew up in the traditions of the Church and the people and with his brothers and sisters experienced what it means to have a home and to feel secure.

Already as a child he left his parental home to study in the town of Brixen. At that time there was no road in his valley and it must have been rather frightening for the ten-year-old as each step took him further from home. They were the first of many steps that would eventually lead him to bid farewell to his home, to his friends and family. Steps that would lead to the realization of his life's dream, a dream to be fulfilled only after taking many more steps to a very distant land. He was able to leave his homeland, his friends and relatives behind because they were alive in his heart. The goal of his journey, indeed his life's goal, was to live for God and for people and China was the right place for this. He wished to achieve his life's goal with and for the Chinese people.

But that proved to be not so simple. Soon after his arrival in China Joseph had to swallow some bitter disappointments. His report to Arnold Janssen about his first two years shows how difficult it had been for him. At home he had been respected, loved and accepted. In China, especially during the two years in Hong Kong, he felt isolated; he was the marginalized foreigner. He had to struggle not to become bitter or sink into discouragement. He frankly admits that the life of a missionary – his own life – is rich in sufferings. "Thorns cover his path". Being isolated in this way with relatively little success got the better of him and it showed in his prejudices. "The Chinese character has little attraction", he writes in his initial disappointment. If the missionaries did not have a higher motivation, "they would all sail back home on the next ship". This language typical of a person whose expectations have not been met. But Joseph overcame these prejudices; he struggled against his disappointment. Years later he would find it impossible to accept that were negative remarks about the Chinese that were made in his presence.

We should not forget how strange China must have been to him in the beginning. It was the time of imperialism when the White race felt superior to all others. Information about foreign peoples was characterized by this attitude. Joseph tried his best but he had to admit that mere external adaptation, wearing Chinese clothing, the obligatory pigtail and a Chinese name, did not make him a different person. He realized he had a difficult journey ahead of him. So he earnestly he began to study "the Chinese point of view, Chinese customs and traditions, the Chinese character and expectations". And he knew that it could not be achieved "in a day, nor a year but only after many a painful operation". "The main point", he came to see, "is the transformation of the inner person".

The longer Joseph lived with the Chinese and worked for them, the more he came to understand them, and all the more did his own personality traits come to the fore. "His charming and engaging friendliness was certainly in part a precious natural gift. But it wasn't just that; otherwise he would not have been able to keep this attitude up so consistently and

continuously", was how Bishop Henninghaus put it.

Tough as mountain farmers are, Joseph did not allow himself to be discouraged. Among his Chinese he matured to become a saint, a selfless person in line with his own principle: "Don't refuse anyone anything and don't desire anything for yourself". Or, as Fr Johannes Blick quotes him: "The pagans will be converted only by the grace of God and, let us add, through our love". For "the language of love is the only language which all pagans understand". Joseph had learnt to speak this language of love very well.

Nothing, neither bodily exertions nor malicious slanders, not painful beatings nor danger-ous death-threats, could lessen his love for the Chinese. Not only did he wear their dress, he also spoke their language perfectly and tried to think in their way. So in the opinion of many he seemed even to have become a Chinese and he himself felt more and more like one. "I have become Chinese and I want to remain Chinese in heaven also".

So long as he had rejected what was for him a strange world he had not been able to be a true missionary. Adaptation had not been enough; what was needed was "an inner change", his own conversion.

St Joseph Freinademetz
1852-1908
One of the pioneers of the SVD
Missions in China

Before sending JOSEPH FREINADEMETZ to the foreign missions, Arnold Janssen let the young priest return to his Alpine homeland in northern Italy for the last time to bid his loved ones goodbye. Joseph then also made a quick visit to San Martino Parish – where he had served as vicar for the first two years of his priesthood.

His farewell homily moved the parishioners to tears. To disperse the gloom that filled the chapel, Joseph then narrated the time when he first confided his mission dream to his priestly elder. The latter just laughed it off as holy folly, and added: 'The day you leave for China, I'll cut my ears off!'.

Joseph then concluded his homily: 'As a parting gift, Father, may I now have your ears?'.

Besides winning hearty laughter, the departing missionary also earned handsome cash … as a mission donation from the one who asked to redeem the ears that were once rashly staked!

Pio Estepa, SVD

Drinking From Comic Wells of Cultural Others

A Native Vaudeville

On a Saturday evening a Pende[1] village starts resounding with the brisk beat of wooden gongs called *mukhokho*. Upon hearing it women and children run in haste to take shelter in their huts. Only the men may now move around in the dark and open air. They gather around tomtom drummers and rehearse songs. The live music in the night reaches the earshot of the neighboring villages. By it people come to know that where the *mukhokho* and tomtoms are playing, there the *mbuya* will take place. Two longer names that this Bantu people gives to its festival of dancing wooden masks are *mbuya saga* and *mbuya mahamba*.[2] *Saga* means play or theater, while *mahamba* may be translated as ancestral law-and-rite. The two labels imply that it is a playful liturgy.

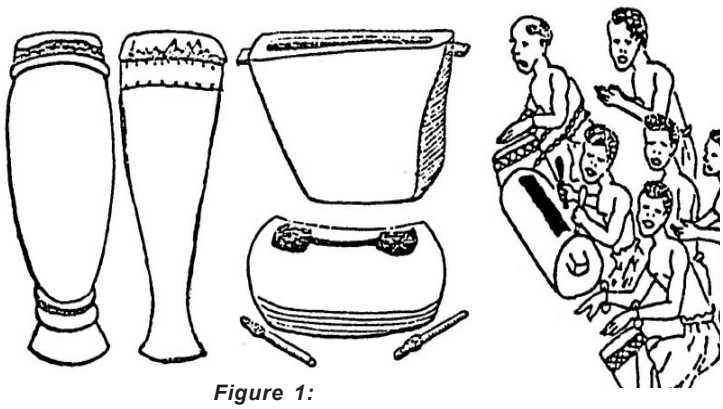


Figure 1:
Two variant shapes of the Pende drum or tomtom, and two variant forms of the wooden gong '*mukhokho*'.

The *mbuya* begins only in the afternoon of the following day at around four o'clock. Traditionally about a dozen of masked dances would be performed. Yet it would push through even if just three to seven of them could perform. The order in which the dancers exhibit the masks follows a general pattern. The first to appear and dance on the scene is always *Tundu*, known as the *fumu mbuya* – the chief of the mask festival. *Tundu* acts as the comic master of ceremonies ushering, accompanying, and at times even interrupting the performances of the other dancers. The presentation of the other masks follows one after another, and sways the emotions of the audience back and forth between awe and fright, pathos and parody.

The singers chant a fanfare, the drummers beat to it, the audience sings along and claps to the rhythm. Then a masked performer enters the scene dancing. Around his ankles he wears *mayombo* or *zisambu* – braces strung with tiny dry gourds within which the hard seeds rattle to the brisk movement. Granted a silent pause, he stomps his feet to set the rhythm of his accompaniment. The drums pick up its beat while a singer intones the chant proper to the mask. Finally, when the musicians' rendition satisfies the dancer's ears, he goes to the centre of the dance area and presents his number with its distinctive music and gestures. After his dance, he walks back to the musicians, thanks them by a clasp of hands, then exits to behind the bushes.

The men form the first row of watchers around the dance area. Women and children – collectively referred to as *tondo* – watch the ritual show only from a distance. If the *fumu ya dimbo* (village chief) or the *fumu a mbanji* (district chief) is present, he stays among the *tondo* and away from the men. The reason given is that although the chief had undergone the male initiation rites, he is believed to have become ritually a woman during his enthronement as ruler over his people.[3] During the show, when certain masked dancers mimic women, the men laugh and hoot toward the female section. The women yell back sallies or insults. To express appreciation for a performer the men approach the masked dancer and discretely press money into his palm. The women, on the other hand, toss calabash jugs containing corn beads, millet seeds, or peanuts into the dance area. An assistant of the dancer gathers and puts them aside for sharing later among the men.

When the sun begins to set, the pleasant masks cede the limelight to the gruesome ones called *mafuzo*. The appearance of one or several figures called *gambuya gamalela* announces this final part of the programme. They run towards the audience, menacing and driving especially the women and children farther away from the dance area. They disappear for a short while at the edge of the bush, and reappear dancing and ushering in *mafuzo* figures one after another. A *mbuya* district centre may have a tradition of a dozen *mafuzo* masks, but only one to three of them appear during a single show. Their wearers do not perform any dance but only make a short pageant that arouses fear or inspires awe. They usually stay at the edge of the bush where they are partly hidden by the shrubs.

Figure 2:
Even on dancing occasions outside the '*mbuya*', women complement graceful male dancers by tossing peanuts or money.

To end the *mbuya*, a team of men sprinkles water on the dance area. Only then may women and children step again on what was temporarily a sacred space. A man bearing two machetes goes to the middle and starts the dance called *mushiebele*, in which everybody present – men and women, from the eldest to the youngest – join in. They form a round and single file, repeat one step forward and another or two backward in harmony with the tomtom rhythms. The men tease the women by chanting lewd refrains they recall from the show, such as: '*O o o gonyo baba a a a!*' [Oh, (her) sexual organ is red!]. To these provoking words the women chant back similar insults to the men. When the singing and the drumming finally die down, they go back home to share their evening meals. The morrow returns to the workaday routine.

An Ancestral Rite

Profane as this native vaudeville may seem at first sight, its sacral character shines through the multiple rites that prepare, present and conclude it. At least a month earlier, male elders who form a secret society meet the dancers and musicians to agree on a date and to choose a host village. Then the first collective work begins – that of fencing off an enclosure (*buadi*) in the bush and building makeshift huts (*itumba*) made of palm branches. The mask sculptors and costume tailors get to work within these shelters. They will later serve as dressing rooms for

the masked dancers. No woman nor child may come close to the *buadi* for fear of being bewitched.

One of these huts is exclusively reserved for the *mafuzo* masks. The term *fuzo* refers to a whitish powder whose main ingredient comes from the *mutshi ya wanga* ('tree of ordeal'). People believe that witches apply this fetish on their bodies to transform themselves into wild animals and to prowl in search of prey. Anyone may also use it to dispel bad luck or the pursuit of evil spirits. The use of the *fuzo* during the *mbuya* combines both ritual purposes. Putting on the *fuzo* masks involves 'assuming second bodies' in the forms of beasts hostile to humans. The noun *fuzo* derives from the verb *gufuza*, to blow. Before the show begins, a fetishist comes to the *buadi* to blow the white powder on all the *fuzo* masked dancers and their assistants. The same person blows the substance along the paths along which they will parade. In this second instance, the ritual act is aimed to protect the performers from evil forces lying in ambush to impede their show.[4]

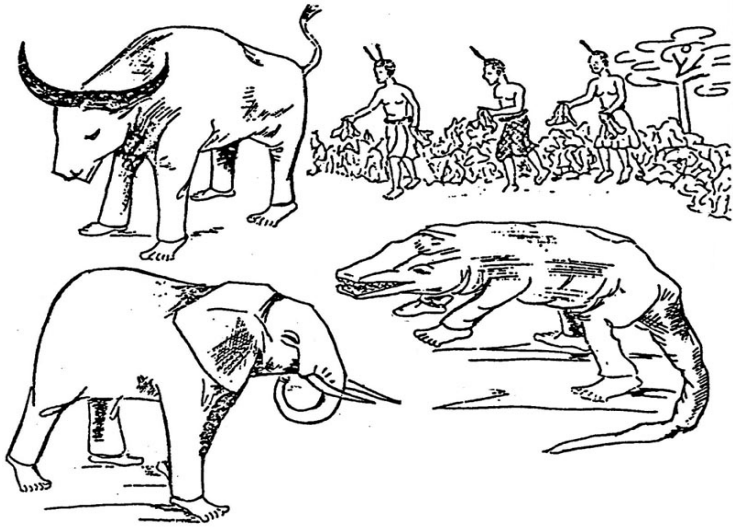


Figure 3:
The *mafuzo* masks – *Pagasa* the buffalo, *Ngiamba* the elephant, and *Ngandu* the crocodile – escorted by ritual bodyguards known as g*ambuya gamalela*. It takes two men to animate each mask-and-costume from within it.

Within the *buadi* itself even a circumcised youth may not approach the hut of the *mafuzo* masks.[5] This spatial taboo implies not only a hierarchy among the masks, but also an order of seniority within the adult male society. The Pende youth had to pass through a long period of initiation[6] in the wild before being deemed an adult. After the circumcision rites called *mukanda,* two other superior but optional stages of initiation follow later: the *mungonge* and the *kela*. These rites progressively raise the rank and prestige of a man within a district fraternity. The fact that young men who have successfully passed the *mukanda* are forbidden from the *mafuzo* shelter implies that it takes higher-ranking adults to perform the *mafuzo* masked dance.

The wooden gong (*mukhokho*) resounding on the eve of the *mbuya* reminds dancers and assistants to observe a double abstinence from food and sex before the show. They have to invent excuses (like suffering from a fever or a contagious illness) for sleeping apart from their wives on a simple mat on the ground.[7] The dancers of those ancestral masks called *mafuzo* have to begin fasting from solid meals even three days earlier to assure the success of their presentation. So that hunger will not make them too weak to perform, they nibble a banana or chew some peanuts from time to time. If they have to use containers for such snacks, they must not eat them from western-made plates but from traditional Pende pots.[8]

During the show the women clap and sing, hoot or trill, heckle or extol a dancing mask as they wish. But no one among them – not even the chief – must dare to step into the dance area. If any of the men on guard called *milombolo* catches a trespasser, he whistles at the culprit who has just broken 'the spinal cord of the dancers'. They then impose a ritual fine (*mukondo*) on him or her: a goat, a sum of money, or pieces of raffia cloth. If the taboo breaker refuses, the ritual guards take domestic animals – such as pigs and chickens – in the village. The blame is cast on the stubborn offender; thus, hounding him or her for payment passes on to the aggrieved owners of the stolen animals.

Figure 4:
After the initiation rites for boys the '*minganji*' masks are buried secretly in the bush. This ancient practice used to be observed equally for the '*mbuya*' masks.

During the *mbuya* itself the masked dancers observe a discrete ritual. Each runs to the dancing ground and returns to the *buadi* in such a way that his back is always towards the sunset. This symbolic act points to a Pende belief that the masked dancers are not humans but *zimvumbi* (plural of *mvumbi*) – spirits of the dead risen from their graves. In fact, the ancestral practice was to bury all the masks in a secret place in the forest after the dance.[9] They then needed to be carved and matched anew with their proper costumes every time the *mbuya* came around. Only later generations relaxed this custom and allowed them to be preserved for the next show. Mask owners wrap them in sacks and hide them in nooks where they must be safe from being seen or touched by a woman or child, for fear of an evil spell being cast. Such a taboo tries to ensure that the identity of the mask's dancer remains known only to the adult male society.

A day or so after the dance festival all the men involved in the staging of the *mbuya* meet again in a secluded place outside the village. There they slaughter the goats and chickens collected as ritual fines. Cooks assigned by the elders prepare them for a sumptuous meal. Part of the money gathered on the dancing ground goes to the purchase of palm wine. The rest is given to the dancers and musicians as a token reward. While they eat and drink, they entertain themselves by performing some *mimba* – songs and dances they had learned together during their initiation rites. With this secret meal called *bina*, the *mbuya* comes to a ritual close.[10]

The Starring Masks

The main clown in the *mbuya* is the *Tundu* who serves as the master of ceremonies. The mask itself has no fixed facial form, but depends on the comic creativity of its carver. Because the *Tundu* clown engages in obscene horseplay, he has gained the nickname *Gibango* – a word meaning 'shameless'. The masked dancer gives the lower parts of his body gestic movements suggestive of coitus. The singers chant: *Gibango a Mashata, dijiga dijiga mushi-shi wa-koma!* [*Gibango of Mashata*, show us your large penis!].[11] At this call the dancer lifts up his raffia skirt (*tugu*) and displays a long and erect wooden organ with a red-painted glans. At times he exhibits a pack of fish on a leaf wrapper to the women in the audience. Offering such a gift of raw fish or meat has romantic undertones: outside the setting of courtship, it is a lure to an illicit love affair. *Tundu* obviously receives only taunts and titters from the female crowd.

Figure 5: **TUNDU**

Gabugu is the clown dressed as a female with whom *Tundu* goes to obscene extremes. At times 'she' acts out a seduction scene in which 'she' lets *Tundu* caress 'her'. These fond exchanges finally end up with lying on the ground and making love. The comic act of one *Gabugu* variant called *Gavulula-Milele* is even a striptease, as its compound name literally means 'to take off one's clothes'. Singers and watchers coax 'her' with a chant to undress. 'She' finally gives in to their request by exposing 'her' large wooden vagina coloured red for the occasion. A variant of *Gabugu*, known as *Nzumba-Boloma*, makes fun of women at work. 'She' wears a skimpy skirt, dirty from tilling her plots in the forest. With one hand, she holds a hoe and with the other keeps a basket firmly balanced on her head. Upon hearing the chant *Nzumba, boloma e e e* ('Nzumba, bend down e e e'), she bows very low until she exposes her red-colored anus behind her. *Nzumba* may be a Pende borrowing of the Kikongo word *nsumba*, which refers to a maiden who has not yet given birth.

A second type of dancing clowns is known as the *mafumu* – a word meaning 'chiefs'. Two distinctive traits of these masks are the raffia goatees dangling down from their chins, and three or four horns capping their heads. The beard signifies elderly dignity. For the Pende the two horns suggest the might of the fierce buffalo. By exceeding or even doubling the number of the symbolic pair, the multi-horned headdress endows its wearer with the magical aura of superhuman power. These masks are also referred to as *Lemba* or *Muatha*. Though these words are synonymous in meaning, *lemba* refers to the uncle ruling a matrilineal extended family. The title *fumu* or *muatha*, on the other hand, can apply to any person – male or female – holding a social position of power or prestige.

Figure 6: **FUMU**

Figure 7: **GIWOYO**

In spite of the glorious title and the musical fanfare given to these chiefly masks, the audience and supporting characters make fun of them. For example: a female figure known as *Kambanda* walks at times beside the clown *Fumu*. This woman appears in the *mbuya* of the region of Katundu as the *muatha muadi* or female chief, while in the region of Gungi she depicts a hussy. One or two clowning *matundu* also escort him. The one holds a parasol over his head, and the other carries a chair for him. The usual prank is to offer him a seat after his regal parade. As he is about to sit, *Tundu* quickly withdraws it. He falls on his buttocks, stands up and just meekly follows his aide who repeats the waggish act a few more times. When the serf finally grants him the humble throne, other maskwearers come to pay him mock homage.[12]

A third group of dancers wears masks whose distinctive trait is the *mutumbi* – a stylized beard that at first sight seems like a prolonged wooden chin. The word *mutumbi* refers equally to a human chin, an animal snout, or a bird's beak. Though the names of these masks vary, such as *Giwoyo*, *Muyombo* and *Ginjinga,* they look alike and are danced together with uniform choreography. They swing their hips gracefully as they hold a fly-switch with one hand and a raffia cloth with the other. They spread out their arms as they leap and twirl, making the raffia fibers of their costume fly and flap about. They drop on their knees, dance in squatting position, raise their folded arms to the height of their shoulders, and nod their heads up and down.[13]

The various names of the *mitumbi* masks offer no clues as to who the persons or personages they

represent are. Yet the *Giwoyo* masked dancer begins his performance with an eloquent gesture. Upon arriving on the scene, he first approaches the *mukhokho* drummer, genuflects, and raises his hands up to him. The latter spits on his exposed palms and exclaims '*Swaa!*'.[14] This symbolic act recalls the saliva rite practiced during the *milonga*, the traditional high court of appeal for justice. Before his discourse the *ngambi* or 'lawyer' of the clan names the lineages who have given birth to his father and mother. As he mentions his patrilineage he kneels and extends his right palm to his paternal grandfather (or a patrilineal proxy in the latter's absence). The father of his father then spits on his palms saying[15]: *Swaa! ukwate na mago, udinjiga na malu, mate ngabutile sh'aye hagna!* [Peace! Hold with your hand, trample with your feet, the saliva with which I begot your father!].

The saliva is therefore a symbol of the male semen. As he next cites his mother's lineage the *ngambi* extends his left palm to his maternal grandfather, who also spits on it and addresses him with a similar blessing. The grandson-orator now rubs the saliva on arrows that he will plant on the ground from time to time to stress his arguments.[16] In short, the *mutumbi* mask represents that important social figure in Pende communities: the *ngambi* – a persuasive spokesman and graceful dancer who defends the cause of his clan in a *milonga* or traditional inter-clannish tribunal. What further confirms the identification of the *mitumbi* masks with the *ngambi* is their visual form: it evokes the image of a sacred cane called *muhango* – whose sole bearer is the *ngambi*. Carved on the handle of this cane is a small head with a handsome face. Its lower part looks like a long, rigid and tapering beard protruding from his chin.[17] Only the *ngambi* may hold and display the *muhango* during a *milonga*.

As evening falls, the last masks to perform are the *mafuzo*. Many of them depict wild animals such as *Nioga* the serpent pair, *Ngandu* the crocodile, *Pagasa* the buffalo, and *Ngiamba* the elephant [*see figure 3*]. The appearance of any of these *mafuzo* masks provokes insults from the women who offer them no gifts at all. For witches are believed to turn into such wild beasts to attack human victims. The most unique and important *fuzo* mask is *Mbambi*, which in the Pende region of Gatundo marks the climax of the whole *mbuya*. Its super-human figure is presented as a gigantic puppet whose face has a prolonged wooden beard *(mutumbi)*. It is raised to a height of eight to ten meters with the help of bamboo poles hidden behind a vast skirt woven of raffia fibers and striped with red and white. From behind the bushes the towering image of *Mbambi* rises and waves his hands controlled by strings inside the frame. Very soon after the audience sees it and acclaims it with cheers, it quickly descends. It surfaces a little later in another part of the savannah. After three or more apparitions at brief intervals, it completely vanishes from view.[18]

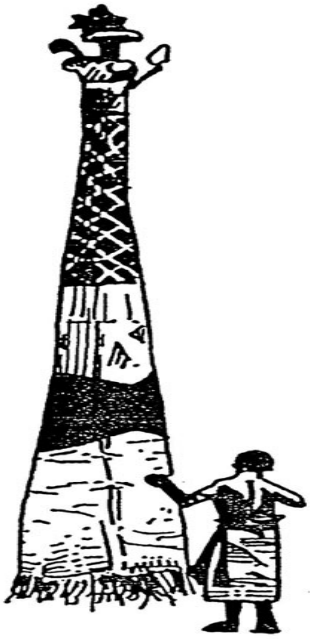


Figure 8: The **MBAMBI** of the Gatundo Region

The *mbuya* of the Ngudi region portrays *Mbambi* in a more humorous – though less sensational – fashion. Its maskwearer is nude except for a loin-cloth. He daubs his whole body with white chalk. His dance consists in leaping up and down at the edge of the savannah like an antelope at play.[19] The word *mbambi* does refer to the species of dwarf antelopes that roam the bush and the woods. Known to Pende hunters as swift and clever in eluding predators and traps, it often emerges as the trickster hero or animal *ngambi* in their comic tales. In oppressive situations caused by stronger beasts (leopard, elephant, or crocodile), the mild yet wild antelope often intervenes to mete out justice through a shrewd prank. One cannot help but wonder: is the name of the masked dancer *Mbambi* – a beast represented in their jokelore as a *ngambi* – an intended pun?

Yet a *mbuya* dancer-author asserts that *Mbambi* does not represent an animal but the 'god of the

ancestors' named *Gaholo Gamingungi*.[20] A few Pende myths narrate that *Gaholo* was a *ngambi* or orator-judge who lived on earth and surpassed all mortals in eloquence and wisdom. Pende elders ascribe ancestral proverbs to his oral authorship. Because of the moral excellence of his life he was not deemed fit to die in the midst of humankind; so he ascended back into heaven.[21] The mythical identification of *Gaholo* as the celestial *Nzambi* who came down to earth as a great *ngambi* concurs with giving a long wooden beard to this last mask: a feature symbolizing the *ngambi's* role. Again, one cannot help but wonder: has naming the dancer *Mbambi* – who mythically represents *Nzambi* as a *ngambi* – been meant as a pun of triple reference?

Joke Rite and Sociocultural Renewal

In all that has been written so far about the Pende, the name of Léon de Sousberghe stands out as a leading authority. Half a century ago, this Jesuit anthropologist averred that the *mbuya* was already a decadent tradition: ancient masks were sold to Europeans without being reproduced, new masks looked alike and lacked the artistic individuality of the ancient ones, western-made cloth was replacing raffia fabric in making their costumes. To the contrary, Mudiji – an erudite Pende who wrote a doctoral thesis in philosophy on the *mbuya* – claims that toward the 1990s this ancestral vaudeville was ever alive and even resurgent. One proof he cites to prove his point is that crowds of Congolese and foreigners alike would come as tourists to watch it. This short study expressly avoids this conflict of opinions. For taking sides on the issue would still fail to clear up the final puzzle: *why* does the *mbuya* weave the sacred and the comic into a festive ritual? Answering this question requires reconstructing – as far as existing ethnographic data will allow – the vibrant role that the *mbuya* used to play for and in traditional Pende communities. For this concluding question, Mary Douglas offers an insightful frame from a socio-anthropological viewpoint.

Rituals are Douglas' preferred starting point for sociocultural analysis. For, as she cogently proves, they encode a collective worldview and direct human action to its social fulfillment.[22] Rituals arise from the human need to create order in the outer world of daily life and in the inner realm of experiences and ideas. She tags the organized relations among persons as *group* and the mental classifier up in our heads as *grid*. Social structure is what results from group interaction, and cosmology from grid reflexivity. One way of measuring the strength or weakness of a *group* is by inspecting a society's system of social control: its set of positive and negative sanctions, formal or informal rewards and punishments, which pressure members to conform to common norms and values. The other way is to observe how closely or distantly persons assume their social roles and positions, and how competitive or cooperative their interaction with one another is.

Douglas next appraises the strength or weakness of a *grid* according to its form and content. Her first way of measuring it is to place a cosmology between the opposing poles of ritualism (strong) and anti-ritualism (weak). *Ritualism* for her signifies the 'heightened appreciation of symbolic action' manifest in the degree to which symbols are perceived as condensed and efficacious. *Condensation* here refers to the extent to which a symbol conveys multiple meanings and the degree to which it arouses strong feelings. *Diffusion* goes in the opposite direction of rendering symbols univocal, and thus more abstract and rational.[23] The second criterion rates the worldliness or asceticism of a cosmological orientation. A worldly religion that values material reality is socially 'strong' because it leads to serious commitment to economic and political activity. An ascetic religion that highlights spiritual joys is socially 'weak' because its leads to a retreat into personal subjectivity.[24]

The traditional Pende village community forms a weak group. This is partly due to an internal social factor: the Pende are matrilineal in kinship yet virilocal in dwelling. In such a setting children grow up with the awareness that where they live now is not where they really belong. Matrilineal kinship demands that when children reach the age of reason (between 7 to 12 years old), they have to move out from their father's village to that of their maternal uncle. Due to weak social sanctions, however, a child by exception may prefer to remain in the midst of his or her paternal kin. Father and mother then compete in winning the affection and allegiance of their offspring. The other cause is external: in the past the Pende had a history of tumultuous migrations in that central

African savannah region. Since the period of Belgian colonization, they now form a part of a multi-tribal and unstably modernizing society. In this situation traditional ways have had a hard time maintaining their sway, while new ones are still struggling to sink roots.

To make up for their weak group, the Pende resort to a strong grid. They observe a rich variety of rituals. They have rites before and after tilling and hunting, rites for founding a new village and for abandoning an old one, rites for safeguarding members who depart from their village and for purifying those who return to its haven, rites for giving birth and for burying the dead, rites to bless wedlock and to absolve incest or adultery, rites to bewitch and to exorcise, rites to kill an old chief and to enthrone a new one. The list does not end here but suffices to show their common orientation toward worldly and personal success. They aim at resolving the whole range from petty problems to serious crises.

At first thought, the *mbuya* seems to function as a ritual confirming the strong grid which, invoked upon the surrounding social chaos, refreshes for the Pende viewers their ancestral vision of world order. The temporal scheme, timing the show of masks before and during dusk cuts across a spatial partition. While the sun is still bright, the non-*fuzo* masks perform on the dance area. As darkness creeps in, the *mafuzo* ones appear and parade at the edge of the bush. The non-*fuzo* masks depict the hunter and the wine-maker, the housewife and the hussy, the chief and the slave, the handsome and the ugly, etc. The *mafuzo* ones, on the other hand, stand for good or evil spirits that mysteriously transcend daily time and space. In short, the two groups of masks are placed in their contrasting proper 'worlds': that of the humble mortals is the safe village by day, whereas that of the spirits is the wild savannah by night.

On closer analysis, however, the neat world-image ritually drawn by the *mbuya* now looks only like a playground on which the ritual jokers erase and redraw, distort and reverse, the lines of their collective grid and group. As Douglas herself later discovered, *anti-rites* exist just as much as *rites* do. By way of *rites*, society treats the human body as its social image. Thus, social norms governing in-group and out-group divisions take the form of food and sex taboos. In short: rites direct and discipline processes in the social body by controlling their symbolic parallels in the physical body. The *anti-rites* go against the ritual current. Through dance and laughter they bring about bodily relaxation, tear down social barriers, and foster informal relations. The *mbuya* exemplifies how anti-ritual glee allows what is obscene and nasty, profane and blasphemous … so long as it passes for being funny.

From a sociocultural viewpoint, what then are anti-rites for? The Pende mixture of weak group and strong grid implies that the relation of cosmology to social structure is more complex than just the former mirroring and sanctioning the latter. Some other variable besides the socially malleable body must stand at the crucial interface of grid and group. According to Douglas, this other factor is the culturally revisable mind. Through comic logic, this creative mind plays with familiar ritual symbols in a way that evokes surprising distortions and revisions of the traditional grid and group lines. Douglas sums up the role of the ritual joker with these words:[25]

> .... [Ritual] jokes expose the inadequacy of realist structurings of experience and so release the pent-up power of the imagination. Perhaps the joker should be classed as a kind of minor mystic. Though only a mundane and border-line type, he is one of those people who pass beyond the bounds of reason and society and give glimpses of a truth which escapes through the mesh of structured concepts. Naturally he is only a humble, poor brother of the true mystic, for his insights are given by accident. They do not combine to form a whole new vision of life, but remain disorganized as a result of the technique which produces them.

By force, therefore, comic deconstruction prepares and enables group-and-grid reconstruction. By way of sexual banter, for example, the *matundu* dancers ritually suspend the strict avoidance relationships daily enforced within Pende matrilineal kinship that is so fearful of incest. Thus, through lewd joking, they enable kith and kin to celebrate sexual pleasure as the central sacrament

of sacred life. The *mafumu* dancers, on the other hand, ritually 'put down the mighty and raise up the lowly' ... as the Gospel song of Mary tersely puts it (Lk 1:52). The naughty pranks played on the chiefs remind those present in the audience that their power rests on the precarious willingness of their subjects to grant them ancestral prestige and respect. Thus, they send their rulers comic warnings to behave justly, if they wish to win the obedience of those whom they govern.

If the *matundu* and *mafumu* dancers poke fun at the Pende *group* or social structure, the *mitumbi* and *mafuzo* dancers engage in toying with the Pende *grid* or cosmology. Two main institutions that Belgian colonization and christianization diffused in Congo were the Western judicial court and the modern literate school. Since then, both have been gradually eroding the vital role of the *ngambi* – as a live oral library of ancestral wisdom and respectable peacemaker in clan conflicts. The graceful dances of the *mitumbi* masks seem to challenge the *ngambi* to rise from its sad plight of being reduced now to just a dazzling medium with a garbled message. Finally, the *mafuzo* masks reveal that from its ritual comic whip the *mbuya* exempts no one – not bad spirits nor dear ancestors … not even the celestial Creator. How ambivalent indeed is the sacred: it frightens as well as enchants. And in the *mbuya* the Pende had found a ritual way of allaying their fearful or troubled *huh!?* toward trans-human forces and of taming their malevolence through an admiring *aah!* or a relieving *haha!*

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NOTES

***** The graphic illustrations in this article are taken from the CEEBA publications cited above and are here reproduced with the permission from then CEEBA director Hermann Hochegger, SVD.***

[1] The Pende are a Bantu tribe in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire). From 1959 to 1988, estimates of their population doubled from 220,000 to at least 450,000. They are dispersed mostly over the region within the 5° to 6.3° parallels and the 18.7° to 20.7° meridians of the globe.

[2] Mudiji, 1989: 65.

[3] Ndambi, 1975: 311.

[4] Muyaga, 1974: 135, 143-5.

[5] Ndambi, 1975: 291, 317.

[6] In pre-colonial times, so say Pende elders, the puberty initiation rites lasted about three years. With the coming of colonization and modernization, the circumcision of babies in hospitals and the prolonged schooling of youth gradually made these customs wither.

[7] Muyaga, 1974: 93. Ndambi, 1975: 57, 65, 137, 209.

[8] Muyaga, 1974: 143. Ndambi, 1975: 213, 271, 285, 291, 311.

[9] Muyaga, 1974: 177.

[10] Ndambi, 1975: 27-29, 35, 131-3, 143, 275-7.

[11] Ndambi, 1976: 77

[12] Muyaga, 1974: 48. Ndambi, 1976: 57. De Sousberghe, 1960: 39,51 52. Mudiji, 1989: 87, 194 5

[13] Ndambi, 1976: 137, 139. De Sousberghe, 1960: 45. Mudiji, 1989: 222.

[14] Ndambi, 1976: 19-21.

[15] De Sousberghe, 1955: 28.

[16] De Sousberghe, 1955: 28-29.

[17] De Sousberghe, 1960: 97-109.

[18] Muyaga, 1974: 168-171

[19] Ndambi, 1976: 210-213.

[20] Ndambi, 1976: 210, 213.

[21] Lengelo and Lusambu's anthology of Pende myths includes an account by a certain Ndambi Muhega from Kitombe Samba. It is a confusing mixture of discourse and narrative about *Gaholo Gamingungi* and a sage named Gidinda Boniface. The account begins with the sentence *Gaholo Gamingungi wakhalele ngambi*, which means '*Gaholo Gamingungi* was a *ngambi*' but which the translator renders *Jésus Christ était fils de Dieu* [Jesus Christ was the son of God]. What follows is an attempt to harmonize the Pende belief in the celestial deity with the Christian Trinity: *Nzambi* is God the Father, *Mpungu* the Holy Spirit, and *Gaholo* Jesus Christ, pp. 110-111. A much earlier version of the myth of Gaholo is recorded in Van Coppenolle and Pierson {1982: 181-191} as *La légende de la peau-talisman*.

[22] Douglas, 1982: 36-38.

[23] Douglas, 1973: 26, 29-30.

[24] Douglas, 1973: 103-4.

[25] Douglas, 1975: 108.

"... They who have the faith have the fun ...".

Gilbert K. Chesterton

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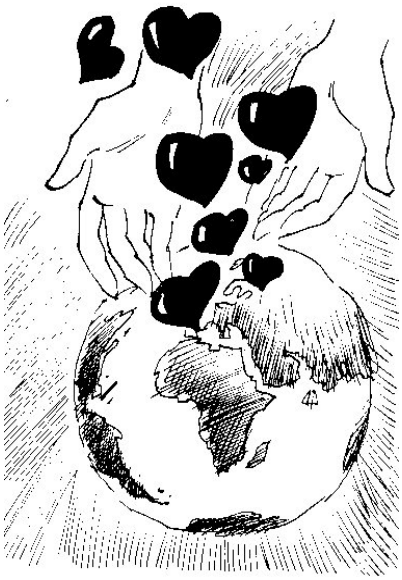

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