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Christ Centredness in the Context of Mission

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SEDOS

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Editorial



Dear Members and Readers,

Just imagine that when Jesus was growing up he must have realized there was some power within him, as he was God

Incarnated. At the same time, he was fully human with all the human attributes. Jesus must have experienced an inner struggle time and again. A time came when he set out to search for himself, giving up everything. Long years past in the company of *Abba*, the Father, His Father, to realize who he is. Once he is fully aware of himself, he comes back to do the will of God. He chooses the Twelve Disciples and invites others to follow him as he starts his journey to Jerusalem. His final destination is Jerusalem and his mission is to receive Glory on the Cross for the salvation of all. There was no turning back. That was his commitment. He chose a few and many aspire to follow him. He makes clear that his discipleship demands a high price. Those who aspire to follow him need to count the cost; have to give up everything. We have taken up this discipleship which demands our commitment to dare and to share.

Mission implies, being with Jesus and being sent out. A disciple of Jesus necessarily needs time to be with Jesus so that he/she can acquire the *Abba* experience and will feel impelled to proclaim the Good News as Jesus did. Therefore, the core of the mission is to be Christ-Centred. The SEDOS Bulletin carries articles that stress the importance of this core experience: Christ-Centeredness.

In his article, “Jesus: Message and Model of Mission: New Testament Perspectives”, James Kroeger, MM, writes, “As Jesus is the incarnation of God’s love, the disciples become people of charity and signs of ‘God’s love in the world — a love without exclusion or partiality’; they serve as a ‘universal brother’ to all those in need (RM, n. 89).” He

gives Scripture references indicating how Jesus was conscious of his unique relationship to the Father and it is he who enables us to have a deep love-relationship with the Father: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love” (Jn 15:9). He says, “Empowered by the transforming love of Father, Son, and Spirit, we engage in mission, telling the entire world of God’s love!”

In the article, “Religious Communities *of* and *for* the Kingdom of God: George M. Soares-Prabhu’s Vision of Priesthood and Religious Life”, Richard Lopes, SJ, presents the prophetic ideas of Fr. Soares Prabhu, the great theologian of our time. According to Soares Prabhu, the Mission of Jesus, namely bringing the Kingdom of God becomes the responsibility of the Priests and Religious in India. The inevitable outcome of this mandate is the Cross, which “exemplifies and vindicates with absolute assurance the spirituality and the praxis of Jesus, who in his freedom and his love chooses to identify with the weak and the foolish and oppose the wise and the strong. It summons us as followers of Jesus to assume the same spirituality of solidarity and struggle.” Here, he is referring to the Indian context but it is applicable everywhere. He says, “To be religious is to be a witness of Christ. That is the most effective way of professing our faith in Christ and proclaiming the message of the Kingdom. We as religious are called to be *ex officio* ‘followers of Christ’ as ‘communities *of* and *for* the Kingdom’ and that is how our life can be an authentic way of following Jesus.”

In the third article, “Mission in Asia Today: Perspectives and Challenges”, Michael Amaladoss, SJ, writes, “When we speak of mission, we immediately think of the missionaries who go on mission to proclaim the good news and convert people. But the Second Vatican Council, when it speaks about mission, starts with the Church but

goes back to Godself. In its Decree on Mission it says, “The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit” (*Ad Gentes*, n. 2).

Today, in our religious and missionary life, we find many challenges as the disciples of Jesus, but still there is hope. In the fourth article, “A Vision for the Future of Religious Life”, Teresa Maya, CCVI, brings out the aspect of hope beautifully. She says that in spite of all the problems, the world is facing, it is hope that can restore the whole world. We need to become *messengers of hope*. And to find hope, we need to be prophetic, and to be prophetic, our lives need to witness to what we believe and who we are. The vision for this kind of prophecy will emerge from the narrative of hope embedded deep in the soul of our respective charisms.

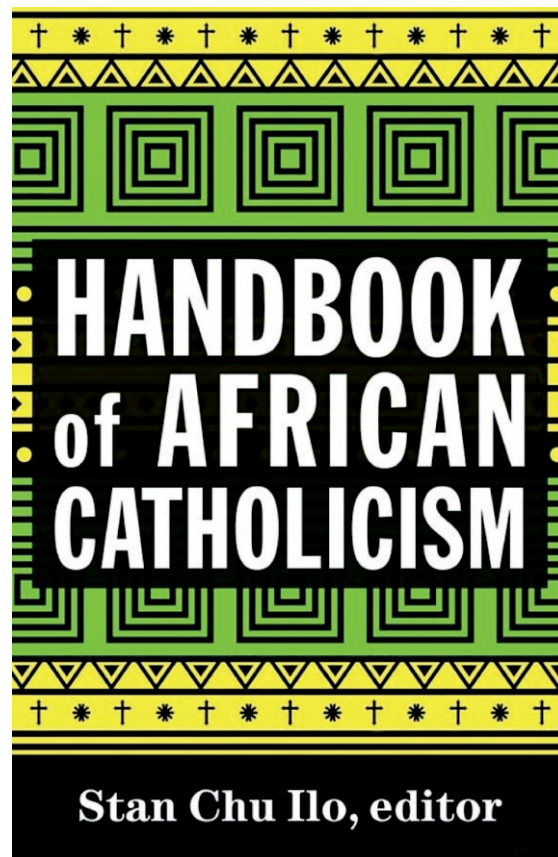
In his article, “Re-Look at the Mission Concept and Missiology”, Jacob Kavunkal, SVD, stresses the need “to return to the original mindset, leaving out the discourse of ‘mission’ and its justification. Rather than missiologists and mission scholars, we need scholars who study the Scriptures, not primarily for teaching and writing about Scripture, but to live it integrally today, attracting many more to that lifestyle. Christians will have to become ‘letters of Jesus Christ’ for all to read.”

The article, “Mission to the Victims of Violence”, by Richard Angolio, SMA, presents the horrific violence against Christians in Nigeria. Such a situation is a big challenge to a disciple. The author presents the beautiful and inspiring examples of disciples, who dare to live their discipleship.

Therefore, being Christ centred, we need to dare to live and bring hope to the lives of others. This is the need of our time. We have nothing to be afraid of as our Master and Leader goes before us. For it is he who says, “Do not be afraid. I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20).

Rev. Dr. John Paul, SVD
Director of SEDOS, Rome.

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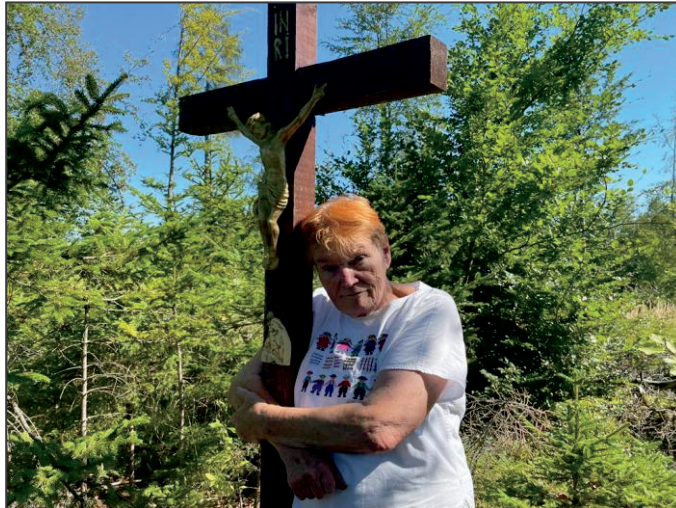
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James Kroeger, MM

Jesus: Message and Model of Mission

New Testament Perspectives

The person of Jesus is found at the center of Christian mission. Recent Popes have spoken eloquently about Jesus and evangelization. Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* noted: “Jesus himself, the Good News of God, was the very first and the greatest evangelizer; he was so through and through: to perfection and to the point of the sacrifice of his earthly life” (EN 7). In his mission encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope John Paul II asserts that Jesus is “at the center of God’s plan of salvation” (RM 6) and that “the Church cannot fail to proclaim that Jesus came to reveal the face of God and to merit salvation for all humankind by his Cross and Resurrection” (RM 11).



From the Album of SEDOS Director

Pope Francis speaks eloquently of Jesus in his 2013 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*: “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day.... Whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms.... With a tenderness which never disappoints..., he makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and to start anew. Let us not flee from the resurrection of Jesus; let us never give up, come what will. May nothing

inspire more than his life, which impels us onwards!” (EG 3).

In his message for World Mission Sunday 2017, Francis writes: “Let us never forget that ‘being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a Person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction’ (Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* 1). The Gospel is a Person who continually

offers himself and constantly invites those who receive him with humble and religious faith to share his life by an effective participation in the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection....

The world vitally needs the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Through the Church, Christ continues his mission as the Good Samaritan, caring for the bleeding wounds of humanity, and as Good Shepherd, constantly seeking out those who wander along winding paths that lead nowhere” (4-5).

For a deeper and more profound understanding of Jesus and his mission, this presentation chooses (from a wide variety of possible valid avenues) to present five themes found in the life and teachings of Jesus which provide insight into Jesus’ “mission message.” These same five themes portray Jesus as a “model of mission” as he moved about Palestine in the company of his

disciples and faithful followers. In addition, these insights will hopefully inspire us to reflect and manifest in our lives the person of Jesus, who is *the message and model of mission!*

I. Jesus' Mission Commands.

The Church has traditionally highlighted the mandates of Jesus to his disciples to engage in mission; in response, over the centuries thousands of dedicated Christians have given their lives to spread the Gospel—both in their home countries as well as in far-flung areas of the world. Interestingly, the “mission commands” appear in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles as words of the risen Lord. They can be conveniently listed: Mk 16:16; Mt 28:18-20; Lk 24:46-48; Jn 20:21; and, Ac 1:8. Two brief examples are provided: “Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Good News to all creation” (Mk 16:16). “As the Father sent me, so am I sending you” (Jn 20:21). Of course, probably the most frequently quoted passage is the “great commission” found in Mt 28:18-20. Each one of these five passages can serve as a basis for a profound discussion, a sharing of insights, as well as a personal invitation to engage in mission.

The consciousness of Jesus' disciples was radically transformed by the experience of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection. Then, in the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, they were provided with the power to make their witnessing effective. These weak and timid men became courageous and fearless proclaimers of the crucified-risen Lord. They witnessed to Christ through selfless service, missionary journeys, and the proclamation of the Gospel. One may validly assert that they received the “true missionary charism” through the anointing of the Spirit. They now perceive that their mission is to go beyond the Jewish people to the Gentiles, always witnessing to Christ until his final return at the Parousia. With the assurance of the Lord, “I am with you always until the end of time” (Mt 28:20), they boldly engage in

mission. The Holy Spirit manifests the Spirit of the Risen Lord; mission becomes the work of the glorified Christ.

In their mission approaches the disciples recall Jesus' own mission vocation (Lk 4:18-19) and how Jesus went about his mission during his earthly life. As Matthew notes, “He went around the whole of Galilee teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom, and curing all kinds of diseases and sickness among the people” (Mt 4:23); thus, the disciples imitate Jesus in teaching, preaching, and healing. As Jesus proclaimed the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-12), missionary disciples become persons of the Beatitudes (cf. RM 91). As Jesus is the incarnation of God's love, the disciples become persons of charity and signs of “God's love in the world—a love without exclusion or partiality”; they serve as a “universal brother” to all those in need (RM 89). They seek to imitate the *kenosis* (Ph 2:5-11) of Jesus (self-emptying love). They embrace hardships and suffering, because they realize that “mission follows this same path and always leads to the foot of the cross” (RM 88). Indeed, it is an understatement to affirm: As Christians we follow no other “model of mission” than Jesus himself!

II. Mission as Discipleship

One can identify *ten aspects* of “discipleship” that provide insight into becoming an authentic missionary. ► The disciple is *called by Jesus*; this is seen in all the Gospels (e.g. Mk 1:16-20, Lk 5:1-11). It is a reversal of the rabbinical custom in the time of Jesus (where the disciple chose his teacher). It comes from God's initiative; we do not do the choosing (Jn 15:16: “I chose you”). A faith response to God's choice is expected of the disciple. ► Indeed, this is a *personal invitation*. Jesus' followers are called by name; we are not anonymous; specific names are given in the New Testament (e.g. Jn 1:35-51; Mk 3:13-19; Mt 4:18-22; Lk 5:1-11). Like Jesus' first

disciples, our unique person is to be put at the service of the Gospel.

Discipleship implies ► *a continuous relationship*, becoming “constant companions” of Jesus. A deep friendship develops (Jn 15:14-15; 15:4-8; 15:13). The disciple shares the daily life of Jesus as he reaches out to the little, least, lost, lonely, and last. Discipleship requires ► *being a listener and learner*. Disciple comes from the word *discens*, to listen and learn. Thus, a disciple imbibes the teachings and approach of Jesus, constantly reaching out and crossing boundaries, in what can be termed a “barrier-breaking” ministry. Jesus often manifested his solidarity through “table-fellowship,” sharing friendship through meals taken together.

The Gospels reveal ► *the ordinariness of the disciples*. Jesus chooses ordinary persons in various roles (Matthew the tax collector; Peter the fisherman; Luke the doctor). “Ordinary” also means *not* being perfect (lacking faith, being blind, seeking honors, being weak and sinful); this is illustrated well in Mt 20:20-28. And yet, these diverse disciples are ► *called to form community*. They are to be together, cooperate, live together; very different personalities are to be integrated into one community: e.g. Simon the Zealot along with Matthew, the tax-collector and Roman collaborator.

Discipleship demands ► *respecting Jesus as master*, following his example. The basic norm or criterion of all authentic love is Jesus’ command to love “*AS I*,” as Jesus loved. Jesus gives us a new commandment (Jn 13:34; 15:12). His love is seen in action in the foot-washing (Jn 13:1-16). Disciples will ► *share Jesus’ mission*. Disciples become apostles (*apostolein*); they are “sent” to preach, heal, comfort, and pray as Jesus did. Note the “disciple-apostle” dynamic; reflection and action are integrated. This is possible through Jesus’ gift of the Spirit (Jn 20:21-22).

Undoubtedly, discipleship implies ► *sharing the Cross of Jesus*. One follows Jesus in all

circumstances (e.g. Mt 10:38-39; 16:24-26; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23-26 [adds “daily”]; Lk 14:27). “Follow me” implies the cross. The cross *always* shocks, scandalizes, and challenges us. Mission is often accomplished in vulnerability (2 Co 12:7-10). A disciple is deeply aware that he is ► *a rehabilitated sinner*. Jesus’ disciples are not perfect; they fail their master. Yet, after the resurrection, Jesus speaks of peace and reconciliation, and this profound experience is committed to the Church’s memory. Many great saints spoke of their personal sinfulness as well as their profound awareness of God’s love and mercy. Truly, one can validly conclude that these ten characteristics reveal our own identity as Jesus’ missionary disciples (cf. EG 119-121).

III. The Kingdom of God.

The word “Kingdom” (*Basileia*) appears nearly one hundred times in the Gospels; it is the central image in Jesus’ preaching. Jesus never defined the Kingdom; however, he used many parables to describe it. Yet, a simple description can prove useful: the Kingdom of God (or in Matthew, the Kingdom of heaven), promised to Israel and proclaimed by Jesus, is God’s ultimate victory over all the enemies of human life—over sin, evil, injustice, oppression, suffering, and even death itself. The Kingdom is the rule of God’s Word in human history; it is humanity’s entrance into a new heaven and a new earth. This Kingdom demands new attitudes in life and renewed relationships with others. The Preface for the Feast of Christ the King, describes the Kingdom as “an eternal and universal kingdom, a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love, and peace.” Promoting this Kingdom is, in brief, a succinct description of the Church’s mission here on earth.

In the New Testament use of this symbol, one should *not* think of the Kingdom as a physical place; rather, it is God’s rule in our lives—both personal and social. Where is the Kingdom? Wherever God rules and

Kingdom values (peace, joy, fraternity, forgiveness, self-sacrifice, love, etc.) are present, there one finds the Kingdom. The Kingdom is, in fact, a “new order” where God’s sovereignty is acknowledged and made visible and concrete. One may ask: Has God’s Kingdom arrived? The answer comes in two affirmations: yes, where God and his Kingdom values are present, the Kingdom is being realized; however, the total fulfillment of the Kingdom has not yet come; it will only fully arrive at the second coming of Christ, at the Parousia. Thus, Christians continually pray: “Your Kingdom come; Your will be done” (Mt 6:10).

Jesus’ proclamation of God’s Kingdom provides the Church with a clear “mission agenda.” Simply stated, the Church is to be an instrument for the realization of God’s rule; her many works are to give concrete witness to the centrality of God’s reign and values both in the human heart and within the wider society. A fine example of “living Kingdom values” is readily seen in the life of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, canonized on September 4, 2016. On that occasion, Pope Francis noted: “Mother Teresa, in all aspects of her life, was a generous dispenser of divine mercy, making herself available to everyone through her welcome and defense of human life, those unborn and those abandoned and discarded. She bowed down

before those who were spent, left to die on the side of the road, seeing in them their God-given dignity.” One may validly affirm: Mother Teresa authentically manifested the coming of God’s Kingdom into this world!

Pope John Paul II in his mission encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* devoted an entire chapter to the Kingdom of God (RM 12-20); his insights are many. “Jesus makes clear his messianic calling: he goes about Galilee preaching the Gospel of God and saying: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel’ (Mk 1:14-15; cf. Mt. 4:17; Lk 4:43)” (RM 13). “The Kingdom aims at transforming human relationships; it grows gradually as people slowly learn to love, forgive and serve one another” (RM 15). “Working for the Kingdom means acknowledging and promoting God’s activity, which is present in human history and transforms it” (RM 15).

IV. God as Merciful Father.

A truly beautiful description of God in the New Testament is that God is “rich in mercy,” *dives in misericordia* (Ep 2:4). Indeed, in numerous biblical passages, Jesus reveals to us the very face of God, who is truly a loving Father, none other than Jesus’ own Father. “The Father and I are one” (Jn

10:30). “I came from the Father and have come into the world” (Jn 16:28), “not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me” (Jn 6:38). “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in His love” (Jn 15:10). “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one can come to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6).

The Gospels consistently speak of Jesus’ loving relationship with his Father. Frequently, Jesus would retire to a quiet

place to be in prayer to his Father (Mk 1:35;



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6:46; Lk 5:16; 6:12; 11:1). In fact, the disciples, observing Jesus' prayer habits, request him to teach them how to pray; Jesus responds with teaching the beautiful "Our Father" (Lk 11:1-4). It is also most noteworthy that Jesus calls upon his loving Father in the "crisis moments" of his life in Gethsemane and on Calvary. "My Father, if this cup cannot pass by without my drinking it, your will be done" (Mt 26:42). "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Lk 23:46).

These scripture references indicate that Jesus was conscious of his unique relationship to the Father; certainly, they reveal the very identity of Jesus: Son of the Father. Furthermore, Jesus enables us to have a deep love-relationship with the Father: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; remain in my love" (Jn 15:9). In fact, the early Church continues teaching that through Baptism, we are in a love-relationship with *Abba* our Father (Rm 8:15; Ga 4:6). John expresses it this way: "Think of the love that the Father has lavished on us, by letting us be called God's children; for that is what we are" (1 Jn 3:1). Empowered by the transforming love of Father, Son, and Spirit, we engage in mission, telling the entire world of God's love!

V. Centrality of Love in Christian Life.

Jesus' transforming teaching clearly includes a new and profound emphasis on the role of love in human life. While the Old Testament had insisted on the love of God and love of neighbor (Dt 6:4-5; Lv 19:18), the Jewish view was that one's neighbor was one's fellow Jew. Jesus does not abrogate the validity of the Old Testament; he announces a new perspective in fulfilling those commands. Explicitly, he says: "Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, I have come not to abolish but to fulfill them" (Mt 5:17). Jesus extends his commandment of love to include everyone—even one's enemies: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; in this way you will be children of your

Father in heaven" (Mt 5:44-45). Indeed, unconditional love of God and neighbor is the greatest commandment of all (cf. Mt 22:34-40); it is, in fact, a mission for all Christians!

Pope Francis expresses Jesus' command to love through the optic of mercy; he insists that *mercy is God's identity card*. The title of Francis' first book as pope is: *The Name of God is Mercy* (2016). Pope Francis declared 2015 as a "Year of Mercy," and he wrote the inspiring document *Misericordiae Vultus* (*The Face of Mercy*). Francis writes that Jesus' entire life and "his person is nothing but love, a love given gratuitously.... The signs he works, especially in the face of sinners, the poor, the marginalized, the sick, and the suffering, are all meant to teach mercy. Everything in him speaks of mercy. Nothing in him is devoid of compassion" (MV 8). His mercy overflows when he invites Matthew the tax collector to follow him; he looked at Matthew with merciful love and chose him: *miserando atque eligendo* [Francis' episcopal motto] (Mt 9:9). Jesus spoke many parables devoted to merciful love: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the father with two sons (Lk 15:4-7, 8-10, 11-32).

Francis continues: "Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life" (MV 10). "The Church is commissioned to announce the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel.... Wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy" (MV 12). On the World Day of Prayer for Vocations in 2014, as he ordained thirteen new priests, he told them: "For the love of Jesus Christ, *never tire of being merciful!*" Speaking of Mary, Francis writes: "My thoughts now turn to the Mother of Mercy.... No one has penetrated the profound mystery of the incarnation like Mary. Her entire life was patterned after the presence of mercy made flesh.... She treasured divine mercy in her heart" (MV 24).

Finally, I fondly recall a joyous event in the Philippine context (my mission field for over five decades). I have often reflected on the theme of Pope Francis' January 2015

Philippine visit; the chosen theme was “*mercy and compassion*”—the mission approach of Jesus and a challenge to all of us to live as Jesus’ missionary-disciples!

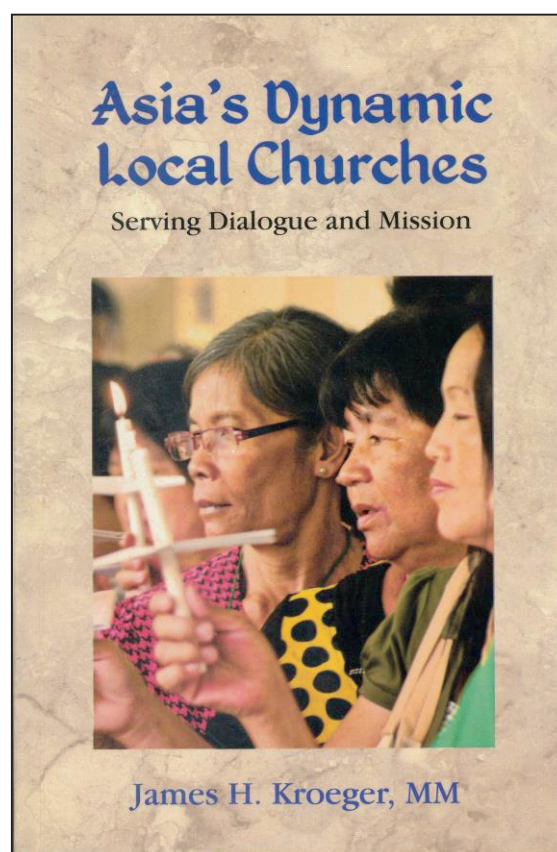
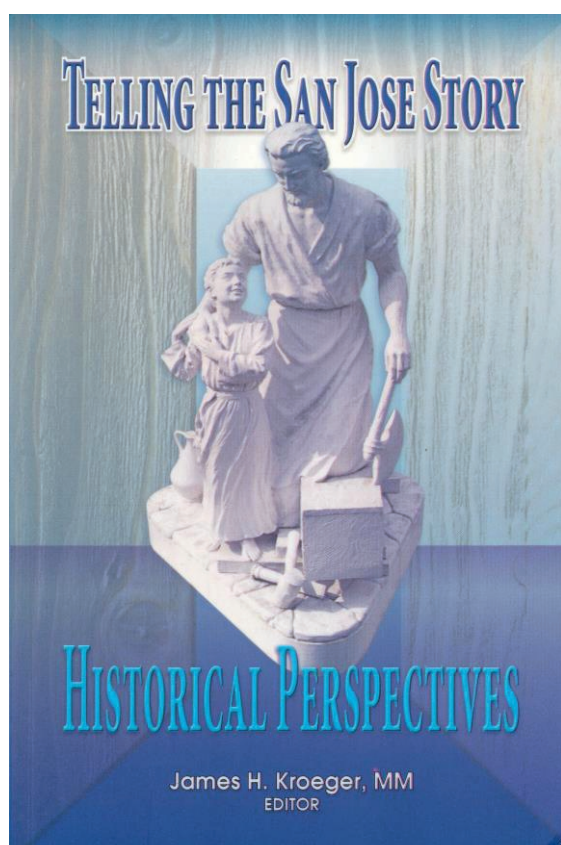
(SEDOS thanks the author of this article for his contribution)

Biodata for: J. Kroeger

Father James H. Kroeger, a Maryknoll Missioner, has served mission in Asia (Philippines and Bangladesh) since his 1970 arrival in the Orient, working in parishes and serving mostly in the education-formation apostolate of seminarians, religious, catechists, and lay leaders. He holds both licentiate and doctorate degrees in Missiology (Mission Theology) from the Gregorian University in Rome.

Father Kroeger has produced numerous theological-missiological-catechetical books. His most recent titles include: *Go, Teach, Make Disciples*; *Exploring the Priesthood with Pope Francis*; *Asia’s Dynamic Local Churches*; *Becoming Missionary Disciples*; *The Gift of Mission*; and, *Exploring the Treasures of Vatican II*. In the coming months Orbis Books will publish a new title by Kroeger: *Walking with Pope Francis*; it is a “synthesis-popularization” of ten papal documents, ranging from 2013-2022.

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(Gifts from James H. Kroeger, MM to the SEDOS Library)

Religious Communities *of* and *for* the Kingdom of God

George M. Soares-Prabhu's Vision of Priesthood and Religious Life

Introduction

George M. Soares-Prabhu's Christology is a dialogue between the Text that emerged from a particular situation of a thirst for liberation (Biblical) and the Context (of Indian Third World) that too thirsts for liberation. He was a scholarly person with the "concern for the poor and fascination for the person of Jesus" (*CWG* 4, xi). The Christology of Soares-Prabhu is a story that "explicates the central symbol 'Jesus of Faith' in terms of his ministry, death and resurrection" (Lobo, 2005: 346). Soares-Prabhu asserts that this story is to be re-narrated in the context of cry-for-life situation of Indian Third World. According to Soares-Prabhu India's cry for life is a cry for survival, a cry for dignity and affirmation, and a cry for recognition and meaning. It is a cry for liberation and dialogue (*CWG* 4, 276). India shares the massive economic poverty of the Third World, pluriform religiosity of life in Asia, but the caste discrimination is specific to India alone. Poverty-Religiosity-Caste constitute India's *samsara*, its cycle of bondage (*CWG* 4, 173). The Caste-ridden Church in India and particularly the consecrated persons have to respond to the challenges of abject poverty and pluriform religiosity. Soares-Prabhu points to the central theme of Jesus' ministry, namely, the Kingdom of God as a roadmap for the Church in India in general, and in particular for the consecrated, to respond to these challenges and create a New Society based on the Kingdom values, namely Freedom, Fellowship and Justice.

Soares-Prabhu points out that though Jesus did not provide a blueprint for the Church, he had a vision of a new society (*CWG* 4, 223) - based on Freedom, Fellowship and Justice. This vision was drawn from his own experience of the unconditionally loving God as Abba. It is this revelation of God as Abba that is the true content of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom (*CWG* 4, 223). In his various writings, Soares-Prabhu would point out that Jesus' mission of realizing the Kingdom of God has been handed over to the religious in India. In this article we shall explore Soares-Prabhu's pointers to the Priests and Religious to carry out effectively Jesus' Mission of the Kingdom of God. We shall first look at Jesus' Vision and Mission of the Kingdom of God the Abba as articulated by Soares-Prabhu. Jesus the Prophet, Priest and Pastor shows us the Agape Marga through His method of Liberative Pedagogy. We shall also show that Jesus invites us to follow His Liberative Pedagogy to carry out His project Kingdom of God. The Church in India in general and the Priests and Religious in particular could follow the Agape Marga of Jesus in order to carry out the Kingdom Mission, through an integrated response that entails living out their identity as the 'Contrast Community' and their profession as 'Prophetic Communities' *of* and *for* the Kingdom of God.

1. God as Abba: The Foundation of Jesus' Vision and Mission of the Kingdom of God

The starting point of the Christology of Soares-Prabhu is the Abba experience of

Jesus that he translated in his way of Agape. His Christology can be summarized in terms of the questions that he asks and the answers he seeks to give to these questions from the perspective of the cry for life situation in the Indian Third World. All throughout his writings he poses questions such as: What does Jesus Christ mean to India in its cultural diversity, its massive poverty and its flourishing religiosity? What is the role of Jesus Christ in Christian theology that will respond effectively to India's cry for life? What is Jesus'Abba experience? How did Jesus perceive the Kingdom? Did Jesus have a vision of a new society? Did his eschatological consciousness, dominated by the expectation of an imminent irruption of God's reign, envisage a new society at all? What was the teaching of Jesus like? What sort of educational model did he follow? (CWG 4, 252).

Soares-Prabhu claims that 'Kingdom of God' is an expression characteristic of Jesus, expressing his own particular consciousness of mission and his own personal experience of God. The expression 'Kingdom of God' or its equivalent 'Kingdom of the Heavens' appears about 90 times in the synoptic Gospels as against to be found rarely in the OT literature and only a few times in other NT writings and that too almost always in the sayings of Jesus (CWG 4, 226). According to the Christological vision of Soares-Prabhu the ultimate truth that Jesus came to teach us is the Kingdom of God based on Jesus'Abba experience.

The basic religious experience of Jesus, that which empowers his whole life and mission and calls into being and sustains the Jesus movement, is his experience of God as unconditional love. Jesus experiences God as a loving Father and dares to address him as *abba* (Mt 14:36). ... In no Jewish prayer is God ever addressed as *abba*. The usage of Jesus is therefore unique and points to a new and unique experience of God as unutterably intimate and close (CWG 4, 181).

By virtue of his Abba experience, Jesus insists on establishing the Truth of the

Kingdom of God. God as the unconditionally loving Abba is the foundational experience of Jesus (CWG 1, 11). Basing himself on his Abba experience, Jesus practiced and taught others to experience every human being as our loving brother and sister. The reason of Jesus' radical openness towards all humankind, and relationship with all humans as brothers and sisters, "is rooted in his radical experience of God as Abba, because to experience God as 'Father' implies that we experience all human beings as brothers and sisters who have a claim on our acceptance and our love. The dharma of Jesus - his understanding of existence and his way of life - is a dharma of unconditional and therefore of absolutely universal love" (CWG 3,167). The Kingdom of God derived from his core experience of God as Abba is the authentic Dharma of Jesus (CWG 4, 258), which announces freedom, fellowship and justice as its values (CWG 4, 224). The parameters of the Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed are freedom, fellowship and justice that lead to Agape, the ultimate Love (CWG 4, 238-44). Jesus' foundational experience of God as Abba mediated by him "brings freedom or personal liberation because it sets a person free from the compulsions and fears that inhibit him or her" (CWG 3,154). This freedom in turn "leads to a fellowship of mutual concern. Born of an experience of unconditional love, the freedom of the Kingdom empowers and impels the free man to surrender his freedom in love" (CWG 4, 154). It is because of this freedom, there is genuine fellowship and as a result "justice will flourish" (CWG 3,155).

2. Jesus' Marga is Agape Marga

The Dharma of Jesus is the Dharma of Sonship which implies a fraternity of humankind, and gives rise to Dharma of concern (Agape) (CWG 4, 167). Jesus' Marga is Agape Marga (CWG 4, 217-18). that is characterized by loving relationship with fellow human beings. Jesus' communion with the untouchables of his society was a proclamation in action,

powerfully announcing the wholly unconditional character of the Father's love (*CWG* 4, 255). Jesus came to lead us to the reality of the Kingdom of God based on his Abba experience. Jesus takes the Agape Marga to lead us to that truth. By virtue of his Abba experience, Jesus insists on establishing the Truth of the Kingdom of God. He experienced God as the unconditionally loving Abba. Basing himself on the Abba experience, he practiced and taught others to experience every human being as our loving brother and sister based on the authentic Dharma of Sonship that Jesus followed (*CWG* 4, 258). The Dharma of Jesus - his Agape Marga - gives a strong revolutionary thrust to the vision of the family of humankind, which calls for the commitment to build a genuinely fraternal community with its own inner dynamism to oppose all social, economic, political or religious structures which hinder the emergence of such a community (*CWG* 4,169).

According to Soares-Prabhu the Marga Jesus follows is "not the way of spiritual insight (*jnana-marga*), not the way of ritual observance (*karma marga*), nor even the way of mystical devotion (*bhakti marga*); it is way of concern (agape)" (*CWG* 3, 65). The uniqueness of Jesus Christ consists of the fact that he is the incarnation of Love. Jesus sums up his ethic in a love commandment according to which, to love God means, concretely, to love neighbour. Jesus' Agape is effective love that responds to the needs of people (*CWG* 3, 8). Jesus subordinates both law and cult to love. The way of Jesus is not the way of ritual observance in the cultic sense, but it is the way of concern (Agape). The scribes in Jesus' time believed that an action was meritorious only when it was commanded by law (*CWG* 3, 65). Jesus on the other hand taught his love commandment: Love of God *is* Love of Neighbour (see Mt 22:37-39). Jesus' way is not ritual centred like in Hinduism or in the Jewish tradition, neither is it exclusively God centred. It is rather Self-Neighbour-God ex-

centred. It is not conventional love of God expressed through rituals and sacrifices and following meticulously the letter of the law. Loving God means for Jesus loving the neighbour with concern and doing good to the neighbour. That is Agape. It is precisely by loving one's neighbour as oneself that one truly loves God with all one's heart. It is the meeting of the three loves, namely Self-Neighbour-God. The true form of the love commandment of Jesus is that we 'love God *in* the neighbour' (*CWG* 3, 65-71).

3. Jesus as the Priest, Prophet and Pastor

The Agape Marga of Jesus - the Dharma of concern - inspires one to respond to the cry of the exploited and oppressed by engaging in action for the removal of structures of untruth that are responsible for exploitation and oppression. In an unjust, unfree and untrue society Agape inevitably becomes a struggle for justice, freedom and truth and strives to set free the oppressed (*CWG* 4, 119). The Agape Marga has been trodden by Jesus in threefold ways: He lives in 'Solidarity with God's People', 'Challenges the unjust Structures of the Society', and 'Teaches with Gentleness and Compassion.' Jesus lives out this mission of Agape as the Priest, Prophet and Pastor.

3.1. Jesus the Priest in Solidarity with God's People

Soares-Prabhu shows that "Jesus appears in the Gospels as non-clerical, even as a somewhat anti-clerical figure. He is not a priest, for he does not belong to a priestly family; and he is shown in continuing conflict with the priestly establishment which ultimately arranges for his death" (*CWG* 2, 222). But at the same time, we see in Jesus the priestly characteristics in the New Testament. The NT proclaims Jesus as the one mediator between God and humankind (1 Tim 2:5), someone like a son of man dressed in priestly vestments (Rev 1:13), the Paschal Lamb (Jn 1:29; 19:36; 1 Cor 5:7; Rev 5:9), offering sacrifice of his blood for expiation for many for the new

covenant (Mk 14:24 Rom 3:25) (*CWG* 2, 223).

Soares-Prabhu speaks of Jesus as the priest in solidarity with God's people, the poor and the oppressed. The oppressed are not just a pitiable group of unfortunates; they are the key axis upon which the history of the Bible unfolds itself, both in the Old Testament (Exodus experience) and in the New Testament (Jesus' option for the oppressed). Thus, the oppressed are not the passive victims of history but those through whom God shapes the history (*CWG* 2, 264-67). Soares-Prabhu states that in response to oppression Jesus identifies himself with the poor, in order to show them an active and effective concern. Such a concern looks to the ending of their social poverty, while calling for a spiritual poverty that will set them and their rich exploiters free from mammon, the compulsive urge to possess. Jesus identified with the poor by being poor himself, by allowing poor among his followers and by choosing his mission field where there were the poor (*CWG* 4, 254). Jesus' solidarity with the poor and his unique divine Sonship constituted him a perfect priest; and his compassion for humankind and his perfect obedience to God's will existentially lived out in his life and ministry and radically manifested in his passion, death and exaltation constituted a perfect once for all sacrifice by which humankind is definitively reconciled with God on the one hand and all other sacrifices reddened obsolete on the other (*CWG* 2, 223-25). As against the holiness code of the Old Testament which defined holiness in terms of 'separation' from the world and the 'otherness' of God (*CWG* 1, 229), for Jesus 'holiness' meant not 'separation' but 'mercy'. He demonstrates this definition in his table fellowship with the polluted tax collectors and sinners, lepers and unclean woman etc. This characteristic of Jesus makes him a Priest different from the OT priests (*CWG* 1, 231).

3.2. Jesus the Prophet Proclaiming the Kingdom of God

The Jesus image that the gospels portray is of a Jesus who was more Prophet than Priest or King. But as Soares-Prabhu shows, Jesus was different from other Biblical prophets in the sense that while the power of the Spirit enthused the prophets in a functional way, it enthused Jesus in an ontological manner. His teaching was the communication of an experience of love - His Abba experience. This profound experience of the love of God transformed Jesus into an extraordinary free person; he was not greedy, ambitious or possessive; he was not afraid of the Law or the religious authorities of his time; he seemed to care little for the public opinion; associated freely with the outcasts and seemed to be free even of family ties. Jesus radically transformed the understanding of ethics, from being a law based to a love-based form of life (*CWG* 3, 3-12).

The spirituality of Jesus is derived from his experience of God's unconditional love "the love which drives him to identification with the poor and the freedom which allows him to confront the rich both derive from this foundational experience of God as Abba" (*CWG* 3, 98). The Abba experience of Jesus makes the person take a prophetic stand as it happened in the case of Jesus as "this experience cannot tolerate any form of discrimination based on race, religion, community or gender; nor can it remain passive in the face of the unjust structures that deprive people of what they need to lead a fully human life, for it is always a brother or sister who is hurt by such discrimination or injustice" (*CWG* 3, 98). Jesus takes sides "in his sharply polarised society, clearly, divided into economic and social classes with conflicting interests" by identifying with "the poor and the outcast, and he confronts the 'establishment' which impoverishes and rejects them" (*CWG* 3, 93). Jesus' "proclamation of humankind as the 'family of God' wholly excludes all forms of racist, sexist, ethnic or caste discrimination. His demand for a radical

concern for the ‘neighbour’ calls for a rejection of any system which creates or enhances an unjust distribution of wealth, status or power” (CWG 3, 96).

3.3. *The Liberative Pedagogy of Jesus the Pastor*

In the writings of Soares-Prabhu, we also come across the image of Jesus as Pastor. Soares-Prabhu speaks of the liberative pedagogy of Jesus (CWG 4,252-66). The pedagogy of Jesus was liberative in a double way, making people “conscious of their worth as children of one Father in heaven” and “freeing them from the manipulative myths which legitimized their oppressive and alienating society” (CWG 4,263). His teaching is open to the little ones, unlearned in the law and the tax collectors and sinners who have no moral or religious standing whatever. He speaks to them the language they would easily understand because “the teaching of Jesus is not the imparting of doctrine but the communication of love” (CWG 4, 255). With many parables Jesus “spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything” (CWG 4, 261). Jesus taught the poor and the rejected of the society. The mission field of Jesus with the only exception of the holy land of Jerusalem was the Palestinian country side with its poor, backward villages and its primitive townships, not the Hellenized urban centres to which the rich flocked (CWG 4,254).

Soares-Prabhu affirms that at the heart of Jesus’ mission there is the intention of the creation of a new humanity. His idea of liberation avoids two simplistic extremes. He is against a spirituality which tolerates injustice and exploitation in the name of an eschatological reward - a pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die; (CWG 4, 184-85). on the other hand, a materialistic reduction of social forces is not acceptable to him either. Thus, liberation according to Soares-Prabhu is this worldly, contemporary affair, a new social order where there will be neither poor nor rich. It will be the movement “through a

change of heart (freedom from fear and greed, freedom for fellowship and universal concern) and a *change of structures* (the removal of social, economic and political systems of exploitation) to a fraternal, non-exploitative social order” (CWG 3,161). This is because Jesus himself intends to bring about “both a *change of heart* (freedom from attachment to riches) and a *change of structures* (liberation from oppressive social systems); for it is this combination alone that can lead to the new humanity which is the ultimate goal of the long process of total liberation that Jesus has begun” (CWG 2, 267).

4. *The Table Fellowship of Jesus*

The table fellowship of Jesus with the tax collectors and sinners was a revolutionary praxis (CWG 1,223) of Jesus who “presents a new experience of God and a new understanding of community, in which there can be no ‘outcasts’ - for God is experienced as a loving Parent, and every fellow Christian as a brother or a sister” (CWG 1, 234). Jesus demonstrates without doubt through his teachings and ministry that there are no outcasts before God and all belong to ‘the family of God’ (CWG 3, 9-10). Soares-Prabhu makes a scathing attack on the caste system that is prevalent in the Indian Church and reprimands us of our corporate sinfulness. The fact that there are Dalit Christians in India and they have to suffer by the Christians themselves is a sign of our sinfulness. In fact, the expression ‘Christian Dalit’ is a contradiction in terms, because there can be no ‘Dalit’ in a Christian community, for in Christ there is neither clean caste nor Dalit (CWG 1, 237). Jesus has shown it by his ‘acted parable’ of his table fellowship with the tax collectors and sinners, through which he brings home to listeners his experience of God as Abba the loving parent, and the ‘good news’ of liberation (CWG 1, 233).

The paradigm of the table fellowship of Jesus in our context of India where the other

and the no-one are the strong elements in our relationships is the right method to establish Dharma that Jesus envisaged. The consequence of the table fellowship of Jesus is his exaltation on the Cross (*CWG* 1, 223). They are mutually inseparable. It involves the breaking of bread and the breaking of our own selves with the other and the no-ones just as Jesus did. Jesus' table fellowship beckons us to include all in the Reign of God that he envisaged and that we want to proclaim and establish. We need to bind together all the divided people in one Eucharistic fellowship beyond the ethnic, linguistic and caste boundaries. It is also our task to make the no-ones as the loved ones of God. This needs to begin first with the Christians themselves as we Christians are divided among ourselves on the basis of caste, language and ethnicity. The next step would be to enter into the lives of the other and include them too in the table fellowship of Jesus with the single goal of giving to all the foretaste of the Reign of God.

5. Jesus' Invitation to be Prophetic Communities *of* and *for* the Kingdom of God

From the writings of Soares-Prabhu, we the Priests and Religious in India could take the following lessons for our Mission in India. The Mission of Jesus, namely the Kingdom of God becomes the responsibility of the Priests and Religious in India. In order to make Jesus' Mission become a reality, we are called to 'Follow the Agape Marga of Jesus the Way', in order to 'Build God's Family in India', 'Follow the Liberative Pedagogy of Jesus the Shepherd' and 'Be the Priests and Religious in Solidarity with the People of God', 'Be the Prophetic Communities *of* and *for* the Kingdom as Salt and Light', and 'Be the Contrast Community living our Identity as the Little Flock.'

5.1. Follow the Agape Marga of Jesus the Way

Soares-Prabhu shows the Agape Marga of Jesus as the Roadmap for Indian Religious.

According to him the Marga Jesus follows is Agape - the Way of concern (*CWG* 3, 65). Agape means effective love that responds "to the needs of the exploited and oppressed neighbour by engaging in action for the removal of structures that are responsible for such exploitation and oppression. In an unjust society *agape* inevitably becomes a struggle for justice: it strives to set free the oppressed" (*CWG* 4, 29119). Soares-Prabhu envisages such an Indian community of religious and priests that would engage in the Agape Marga by responding to the needs of the Indian masses suffering because of the unjust structures. Only way out of this rut is Agape - effective love, which "then, will respond to the needs of the exploited and oppressed neighbour by engaging in action for the removal of the structures that are responsible for such exploitation and oppression. In an unjust society *agape* inevitably becomes a struggle for justice" (*CWG* 4, 119). At the basis of this Marga is Jesus' experience of God as Abba which is passed on to his followers in India: "Ultimately then our *agape* is rooted in our experience of God as *Abba*; for to experience God as Father is to experience every human being as brother or sister. Our love for neighbour is a consequence of our experience of God's love for us" (*CWG* 4,122).

The Jesus community which emerged from and embodied the Abba experience of Jesus was characterized by the salient features such as, 'Radical Freedom', 'Radical Universalism', 'Radical Sharing', 'Radical Service' and 'Radical Equality'. This should become the archetypal community for all Christian communities (*CWG* 4, 143-48).

The Abba experience would help us religious to act with 'Radical Freedom' to commit ourselves to the cause of the Kingdom because this radical freedom is a freedom from our multiple alienation and "freedom for universal commitment. The experience of God as *abba* implies experiencing all human beings as brothers and sisters, and so rules out all discrimination on any ground

whatsoever” (CWG 4,145). This freedom comes from the experience of God’s unconditional love which frees us from our bondage to Mammon (greed, consumerism, ‘the concupiscence of the eyes’), and thereby we are able to form a community of ‘Radical Sharing’. Because this unconditional love frees us from the craving for power, (ambition, the need to dominate, ‘the pride of life’), we can form a community of ‘Radical Service’. (CWG 4, 146). Following the Agape Marga is a prophetic act challenging the structures of injustice, inequality and hatred and would make us a radically egalitarian community of ‘Radical Universalism’. Differences of race, class, and sex would not affect our basic relationship with Jesus nor our basic worth as human beings who are children of the one Father in heaven. We would become an authentic Jesus community of ‘Radical Equality’, which would not tolerate any form of stratification (racist or caste) which touches the intrinsic worth of a person (CWG 4, 147).

5.2. Priests as the Builders of God's Family

Soares-Prabhu’s method involves concerns such as the option for the poor, integral liberation of the individuals as well as the social structures and dialogue with religious traditions that would help evolve a more inclusive Christology and a more open theology of religions and a much less militant understanding of mission. It is with this concern and openness that Soares-Prabhu invites the priests and religious to get involved in the Indian reality. The priest/religious in India cannot limit themselves to build “closed and self-satisfied Christian communities, but must reach out to the creation of the eschatological human community (the new heaven and the new earth) which lies on the horizons of human and cosmic history (Rev 21:1-4)” (CWG 2, 238).

Soares-Prabhu insists that the “new understanding of priesthood” presented in the NT “must determine the shape of the Christian priesthood in India today” (CWG

2,215). The main task of the priest in India should be to work as “a community builder, whose concerns reach beyond the minuscule Christian community to which he belongs. He is called to represent, that is, to make present here and now, the one priesthood of Jesus through which all things have been reconciled to the Father. His concerns must be as large as the concerns of Jesus himself” who came to “establish the reign of God” by living out “a priesthood of self-giving into and in history, which reconciles all things to the Father and leads human and cosmic history to fulfillment” (CWG 2, 238).

Jesus’ Sonship is the source of his Dharma (CWG 4,165). The Dharma of Sonship implies a fraternity of humankind, and gives rise to Dharma of concern (Agape) (CWG 4, 165). The Lord’s Prayer is the crystallized form of his Dharma (Lobo, 2005: 396). This prayer invites us to reconciliation and sharing of bread, making us one family, encouraging us to work for *Lokasamgraha*, which is in fact the Dharma of Jesus. The Dharma of Jesus looks forward to building up of a universal and fraternal community of sharing and love (CWG 4, 169). Imitating Jesus, the priest today must enter into Jesus’ movement of the kingdom which continually subverts a world structured by relationships of oppression, violence, and exploitation; and replaces it by a new world structured on relationships of respect, freedom and love. Building such communities of the Kingdom (which in India will not be just narrowly institutionally Christian communities) is the primary task of the Christian priests who represent the saving priesthood of Jesus (CWG 2, 238-39).

Soares-Prabhu calls upon the priests today to make a shift from cultic priesthood to be the builders of the family of God. The cultic role of the priest, even though reaffirmed in the Council (LG 10) is not to be taken as his primary role. It is part of his mission to gather together “God’s family as a brotherhood of unity” (CWG 2, 238). The family of God which the priest builds is not a

closed, communal family. It is a family that is open to the world. Citing *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 6, Soares-Prabhu says that priests as the builders of the community are to be 'Alter Christus' who "exercise the office of Christ, the Head and Shepherd. Thus, they gather God's family together as a brotherhood (and sisterhood) of living unity, and lead it through Christ and in the Spirit to God the Father" (CWG 2, 238).

Soares-Prabhu is clear that the Catholic Priest should follow his call for service and not to exhibit his power, to build up the Christian and human community and not merely carrying out cultic function. He says:

The Christian priest is not a cultic functionary (a *hiereus*, a *pujari*) that is, a sacral person who has been consecrated to preside over the Eucharist or administer the sacraments. He is a pastor, that is, someone who has been officially charged with the building up of the Christian (and eventually the human) community, by making the saving work of Jesus effectively present to us through word, sign and style of life. Any cultic function that the priest exercises is at the service of his pastoral office. This pastoral function the Christian priest exercises as a 'ministry', that is an act of service, not a manifestation of skill, of status or of power (CWG 2, 234).

5.3. Follow the Liberative Pedagogy of Jesus

Soares-Prabhu speaks of the Liberative Pedagogy of Jesus and invites the priests and religious in India to follow the same Pedagogy to teach the message of the Kingdom. He stresses the need for integral liberation but especially for liberation from social oppression. This is possible only if we follow the Pedagogy of Jesus. Jesus identified himself with the poor in order to show them an active and effective concern - namely His Agape experience. Such an approach will enable the priests and religious in India to reach out to the peripheries and thus include all in the project Kingdom of God.

Jesus' vision of a new society is an unfinished task handed over to his followers in pursuit of establishing the Kingdom of God. It is not the goal but the way that invites us to realize the values of the Kingdom. It is a ceaseless struggle against the demonic structures of injustice, unfreedom and untruth erected by mammon. It is a task left by Jesus for us his followers to involve ourselves in the permanent revolution of establishing the Kingdom of Truth as envisioned by Jesus. It is a task to strive for genuine fellowship, for justice and for freedom. The radical concern for the Kingdom, inspired by the revolutionary Christ, will not tolerate passivity in the face of social, economic and political structures which oppress and dehumanize (CWG 4, 241-45). The vision of Jesus summons us, "to a ceaseless creativity that will produce in every age new blueprints for a society ever more consonant with Gospel vision of man. Lying on the horizons of human history and yet part of it, offered to us as a gift yet confronting us as a challenge, Jesus' vision of a new society stands before us as an unfinished task, summoning us to permanent revolution" (CWG 4, 244). Our task therefore, in India is to develop a theology of liberation "which will be concerned with both societal change and personal self-realization." (CWG 1, 56).

In our country, where millions of Indians are struggling to get their rights and longing for the fulfilment of the needs of their bodies and souls, the priests and religious have to follow the way of Jesus. Jesus' way of selfless love and service is the real, natural and easily accessible way to fulfilment. India is a '*kurukshetra*' rather the '*dharmakshetra*' where the forces of unfreedom, hatred and injustice are becoming more powerful. It is in such a situation the Liberative Pedagogy of Jesus will give us the direction to go the way of the Kingdom of God ruled by *Nishkama Karma* to establish Dharma characterized by freedom, fellowship and justice. Soares-Prabhu shows that such a response would usher in "a mighty

movement of personal and societal liberation which sweeps through human history. The movement brings *freedom* inasmuch it liberates each individual from the inadequacies and obsessions that shackle him. It fosters *fellowship*, because it empowers free individuals to exercise their concern for each other in genuine community. And it leads on to *justice*, because it impels every true community to adopt the just societal structures which alone make freedom and fellowship possible” (CWG 4,238-39). Such pedagogy would automatically demand our solidarity with the poor of God.

5.4. Be the Priests and Religious in Solidarity with the People of God

In his various writings, Soares-Prabhu points out to the westernized way of theologizing which does not emerge from grass root communities “but is the work of Western educated scholars, living in the seclusion of culturally isolated academic institutions, and theologizing in a foreign language” (CWG 4, 34). Drawing our attention especially to the seminary theology, he says that Christian theology in India is “an imitative and an imported theology, less concerned with local issues (poverty, religions, caste - which rarely figure in our theological treatises)” (CWG 4, 34).

It is because of this type of westernized theology with the “knife and fork culture”, “the sahib culture”, “colonial fortresses” (CWG 1,87-91). that we have become mediocre in mission, numb to injustice, insensitive to the cry of the poor and comfortable in our mansions. Soares-Prabhu asks therefore: “Where among us is the passion of Jesus? His sharp compassion? His blazing anger at injustice? His identification with the poor? Are we not too well-liked by the rich, too comfortably adjusted to an unjust society, too much at home with the powerful...? Has not our religious witness lost its bite? Are we not in danger of losing the sharp invigorating savour that the followers of Jesus are to communicate to the

world?” (CWG 3, 222).

His challenge to the Indian priests, religious and theologians is to play the role of a pilgrim who “must always go a little further” (CWG 1, 80), and produce the ‘Third World Theology’ by raising issues related to two massive closely interrelated realities, namely ‘overwhelming poverty’ and ‘multifaceted religiosity’ (CWG 1, 54). He is convinced that Christian spirituality cannot be authentic “without an active concern for the poor, who are experienced not merely as objects of charity but as brothers and sisters in need” (CWG 1, 192). The most significant traits of the spirituality of Jesus, namely “Freedom and love, leading to identification with the powerless and confrontation with those in power” should be the basis of the “spirituality suitable for those who are engaged in the struggle for the liberation of the poor and the oppressed” (CWG 3, 89). Because of Jesus’ self-defining option for the poor, “the life of Jesus is lived out in the twin dimensions of *solidarity and conflict*. These are the complementary expressions of his God-experience. The gospels show Jesus living a life of progressive identification with the poor and of growing conflict with those who oppress them” (CWG 4, 288).

In order to effectively carry out our Kingdom mission in India, Soares-Prabhu proposes that we need to approach our mission on three levels. 1) Institutional service to the needy through its health and education ministry; 2) Working not just for the poor but with the poor, in solidarity, mobilising them to confront “the principalities and powers” and 3) Involvement at ‘tree-tops’ to influence the policy makers and politicians in order to translate the values of the Kingdom into economic and political strategies (CWG 1, 154-55).

The inevitable outcome of this way of life is the Cross, which “exemplifies and vindicates with absolute assurance the spirituality and the praxis of Jesus, who in his freedom and his love chooses to identify with the weak and the foolish and oppose the wise and the

strong. It summons us as followers of Jesus to assume the same spirituality of solidarity and struggle” (CWG 3, 101). The Cross is the natural outcome of a life of solidarity with the poor and the outcasts but conflict with the rich and the powerful which leads “to the fatal confrontation which could only end with a foreseen and freely accepted death. And this death becomes the appropriate fulfilment of a life lived out with and for the poor and the outcasts. For on the cross Jesus is wholly poor and totally. Identification and confrontation have here reached their furthest possible limits. Jesus is one with the marginalized and all the martyred victims of the earth” (CWG 4, 290). It was a journey from the centre to the periphery. This was the journey of the Prophet. This too is the journey of myriads of prophets present today in India and is the way we are called to tread - to be the prophetic communities *of* and *for* the Kingdom of God.

5.5. *Be the Prophetic Communities of and for the Kingdom*

Soares-Prabhu calls upon the priests and religious to form prophetic communities *of* and *for* the Kingdom. As prophetic communities they become a symbol and sacrament of the Kingdom, thereby pointing to the reality they themselves are. Soares-Prabhu writes: “Religious life, then, is meant to be a visible communitarian sign. It “symbolizes on behalf of all Christians” and “testifies in an exemplary fashion” to the radical gospel values by which all Christians are invited to live. It does this by institutionalizing these values. ... *Religious then, live out institutionally, in a socially structured and therefore public and visible way, the radical*

demands of following Jesus” (CWG 3, 209-10). As religious we are followers of Jesus by profession. Religious life is “a living out publicly, professionally, institutionally (and therefore in community) of the “following of Christ as proposed by the gospel,” and so of the gospel values that are implicit in all Christian life. It is in this sense that religious life is a sign. It makes visible officially, institutionally, what is implicit in all true Christian existence” (CWG 3,210).

In the midst of our broken society scourged by consumerism on the one hand and destitution on the other, religious communities are called to take a stand on the side of the poor, lest we become godless. “For ultimately our greed is a sign of our godlessness; and the presence of the destitute in our midst is the mark of our infidelity to Jesus ... Our consumerism, then, is an option against God; our neglect of the poor is a neglect of Jesus” (CWG 2,267). In order that religious life becomes a symbol of the prophetic communities *of* and *for* the Kingdom, “religious communities must share with and so share in the lot of the poor; must reach out to the rejected and the outcast; and must show themselves wholly committed to the cause of the Kingdom. Sharing poverty, affirming love and committed obedience in community shape the prophetic ‘being’ of religious life” (CWG 3, 219).

In India, to be religious is to be a witness of Christ. That is the most effective way of professing our faith in Christ and proclaiming the message of the Kingdom. We as religious are called to be “*ex officio* ‘followers of Christ’” as “communities *of* and *for* the Kingdom” and that is how our



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life would be an authentic way of following Jesus (CWG 3,205-06). Light and salt are the two images proposed by Soares-Prabhu for the disciples of Christ - “as light which illumines the darkness, when it is not hidden under the bushel; or as salt which gives savour, as long as it has not lost its saltiness” (CWG 1, 42). This is why we are called to be salt and light, and because we are salt of the earth and the light of the world, we must let our light shine before others. We as salt and light in the Indian context of consumerism and destitution could become the messengers of Christ and the sacrament of God’s Kingdom. Salt and light are the two symbols that point to the religious communities as prophetic communities of and for the Kingdom of God that exercise their prophetic role through both their action and their being (CWG 3, 236). They become the sacrament of the Kingdom because as they show forth through “the quality of their lives (their ‘being’) the values of the Kingdom, they are equally communities for the Kingdom striving through their commitment to the total liberation of humankind to bring about the full realization of the Kingdom of God” (CWG 3, 236).

5.6. Be the Contrast Community living our Identity as the Little Flock

With our presence less than 2% of the entire population of India, we are an insignificant minority as far as the numbers are concerned. But we are the ‘Little Flock’, the image given to us by Jesus himself. As the little flock we are called to give up our possessions, and give alms, not to make purses for ourselves and to place our heart where our treasure is (Lk 12:32-34). Unfortunately, as Soares-Prabhu points out, “with the stifling ritualism of our worship and the unbridled legalism of our canon law, with all our ecclesiastical careerism, our petty tyrannies, our delight in tinsel titles, and our unceasing clamour for our ‘minority’ rights, with our large neglect of the poor, our shoddy compromises with the powerful, our connivance at injustice and our worship of

wealth, we are, surely, far indeed from the dream that Jesus dreamed” (CWG 3,133).

Here in this context, Soares-Prabhu summons us to be the ‘Contrast Communities’. That requires “a change of hearts and a change of structures.” The change should begin with us and with our structures, in order to become the contrast community projected by the Bible a reality. “For a change of structures without change of hearts will lead to new forms of oppression; while a change of hearts without change of structures will leave the present crushing form or oppression intact. Attitudinal and structural change are both necessary, because ultimately attitudes and structures are dialectically related” (CWG 4, 192-93).

The Church in India and the Religious communities in particular are to be ‘communities of being’ and ‘communities of action’. As communities of being religious communities are to be “contrast communities which show that it is possible to live fruitful and fulfilled lives based on values which are the opposite of those proposed by the power and possession hungry consumer society in which we live.... Religious communities are therefore communities of the Kingdom making visible in an anticipatory and provisional way the values of the end-time community (its freedom, its love, its justice) in the concrete historical circumstances of our time” (CWG 3, 211). This is a call given to God’s people whom God will fashion “into a community that will give concrete shape to his concern of the poor, and will function as a ‘contrast community’, a free, just, non-exploitative society that will provide an alternative societal model to the violent and oppressive city states” among whom are to live God’s people (CWG 4, 188).

What Soares-Prabhu says about the ‘contrast community’ is in fact happening in India, if we consider the contribution of myriads of Indian Christians who in their radical, public living out of the following of Jesus

“inevitably exercise the same prophetic impact on the Church as the Church in its faithfulness to the values of Jesus is expected to exercise towards the world” (*CWG* 3, 234). This necessarily entails the twin dimensions of the life of Jesus, namely solidarity and conflict. Do we have prophets today who live such a spirituality? Two examples can be showcased here as representatives of the Religious in India who pave the way for the Church in India to be a ‘contrast community’: Samuel Rayan and Stan Swamy. Speaking about Samuel Rayan, Soares-Prabhu writes:

In Rayan’s theology the academic resources of the West and the spiritual resources of the East come together to give something that is quite distinctively his own. His theology is unmistakably itself. It is marked by a steadfast commitment to the poor, a profound sensitivity to the religious traditions of India, and a rootedness in the Bible, read not as academic text but a religious book. It is expressed in a language that is lucid and moving, because it is the outflow of the intelligence and passion that informs his thinking. ... It succeeds admirably in bringing the prophetic, revolutionary message of Jesus to bear on the concrete situations that his readers live in (*CWG* 1,102-03).

A lot has been happening to Stan Swamy these days because of the stand he has taken for the Tribals. Stan Swamy (83) an Indian Jesuit, has been working for the integral development of the *Adivasis*, empowering them and helping them assert their dignity and rights and activate their agency, and stands with them as they oppose the ‘developmental’ processes that eventually would destroy their culture and life. Stan Swamy raises questions that make those who hold authority, power and wealth uncomfortable and annoys them. In order to suppress his prophetic voice, the Indian government goes all guns at him. That is why, falsely alleging Stan of the links with the Bhima- Koregaon incident and links with the Maoists aka Naxalites, the National

Investigation Agency (NIA) arrested him on 8th October 2020. Rejecting all the allegations, Stan stated clearly: “Over the last two decades, I have identified myself with the adivasi people and their struggle for a life of dignity and self-respect. As a writer, I have tried to analyze the different issues they face. In this process, I have clearly expressed my dissent over several policies and laws enacted by the government in the light of the Indian constitution. I have questioned the validity, legality and justness of several steps taken by the government and the ruling class” (Alla 2020).

Referring to the arrests of activists, intellectuals and student leaders all over the country and speaking about the broader process that is taking place all over the country, Stan says in a video message: “We are part of the process. In a way, I am happy, to be part of this process because I am not a silent spectator but a part of it, part of the game and ready to pay the price whatever it be” (Swamy 2020). Here is another example in Stan Swamy of the ‘contrast community’ that we are called to be and not to be a mere silent spectator. It is the Kairos moment of the Indian Church as Alla Stanislaus says: “Even though all Christians by vocation are called to be prophets, when they and especially clergy and religious, consciously ‘grow-up’ into prophets the Church can gladly recognize it as a Kairos moment” (Alla 2020).

Conclusion

Already in Vat II, more than 55 years ago, the Church had declared that the “joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well” (GS 1). Ever since, there have been many theologians all over the world, who are beaconing the Church to be in solidarity with the poor and afflicted. One striking example of such theologians in India is George M. Soares-Prabhu who gives the

clergy and religious in India the roadmap to be the prophetic communities *of* and *for* the Kingdom of God by being a 'contrast community' in order to live out our identity as the Church in solidarity with the poor and afflicted. The circumstances then and the circumstances now are similar, in fact, they are starker now.

Pope Francis invites us to show that solidarity with the poor and afflicted as he writes in his social encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* 33: "The pain, uncertainty and fear, and the realization of our own limitations, brought on by the pandemic have only made it all the more urgent that we rethink our styles of life, our relationships, the organization of our societies and, above all, the meaning of our existence." The mission of the Church becomes more urgent and challenging today, in the time of the pandemic but also because of the abject poverty, the fanatic religiosity and the corrupt political structures.

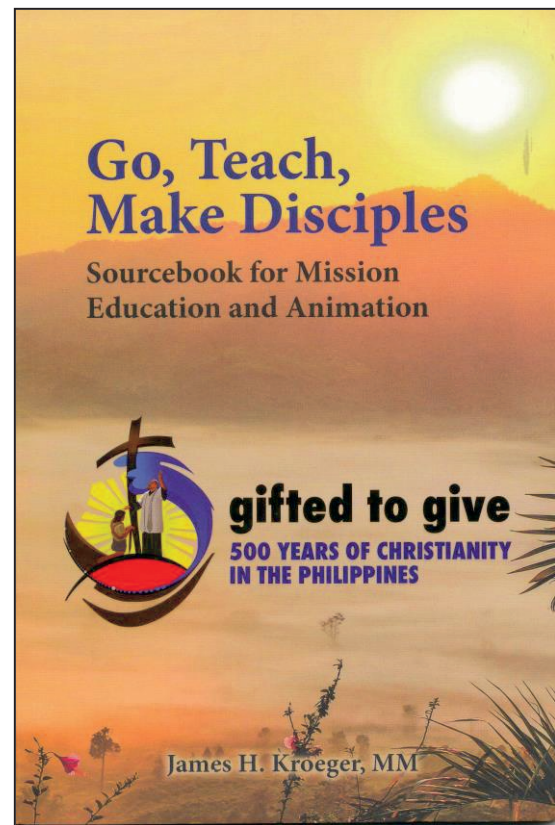
In order to live as the true followers of Christ in India, we need to personalize the vision of Jesus Christ. God is the Abba of all, loving us unconditionally, and hence we relate to the others as brothers and sisters on the Marga shown by Jesus, namely that of Agape - of loving concern. Many have lived the way of Jesus and many continue to live it in the present difficult times. The way is that of Agape, concern, praxis, as Soares-Prabhu asserts "the mystery of Jesus can be grasped only through praxis, because Jesus is essentially the way" (*CWG* 4, 291). Walking on the path of Jesus - the path of unconditional love, we could become the true witnesses of the Gospel of Christ. The Kingdom of God has been handed over to us as a gift, but it is not a finished product. It is also a task. It is already and not yet. The battle is on, the process continues, the call is to become part of the process.

The mission of Christ can be fulfilled if we become the Prophetic Communities *of* and *for* the Kingdom of God, that radiate the light of Christ to India to build a Nation based on Freedom, Fellowship, Justice. Imbibing His

Liberative Pedagogy, the mission of Christ can be carried out in the context of the divided nation by being the 'Contrast Community' and thereby bring about the Kingdom of God that Jesus envisaged. Let us take up our Cross and follow Him on His Agape Marga.

(Ref: *Jnanadeepa, Pune Journal of Religious Studies*, Volume 25/1-2, pp.106 - 132).

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Michael Amaladoss, SJ

Mission in Asia Today

Perspectives and Challenges

Christian mission efforts in Asian countries did not produce a lot of success. There were some initiatives towards dialogue, particularly in the wake of Vatican II and its perspective of God's mission and the Kingdom of God. The Asian churches built on these grounds and developed the triple dialogue with the poor, the religions and the cultures of Asia. Today, with the fourth industrial revolution and artificial intelligence, the humanization remains as an important challenge in mission.

Mission used to be seen as the proclamation of the Gospel, promoting conversions and the founding of the church in areas where the church is not yet present. St. Thomas the Apostle ventured to go to India and establish the church there, which continued its tenuous links to Syria over the centuries. An effort by the Syrian Church to have an outpost in North-west China in the 8th century did not succeed. The discovery of the Americas and a new route to Asia around Africa started the colonial period. The missionaries accompanied the traders and the armies. They found it easier to impose Christianity on the poor tribal populations of the Americas. With Christianity they also imposed their cultures thanks to large-scale migrations.

In Asia some early Franciscan efforts were not very successful. Then the Jesuits came with the Portuguese colonialists. Early missionaries like St. Francis Xavier “converted” poor fisher-people along the coasts. The Asians had developed cultures, older than those of the Europeans, and they also had the great Asian religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism/Taoism. So insightful

missionaries like Mateo Ricci and Roberto de Nobili adopted the way of dialogue with the cultures of China and India. Their relation to Asian religions may have been more polemical. But, unfortunately, they were not able to make much impact because the church structures remained basically Latin. Only the catechism and the popular devotional celebrations were in the vernacular languages.

There was however an unofficial movement of dialogue with Asian religions—Hinduism and Buddhism—from the beginnings of the 20th century.¹ Actually, in India, it was the Hindu intellectuals who began the dialogue claiming that Jesus was an Oriental wise man, Westernized by the Europeans. A Belgian Jesuit missionary, Pierre Johanns, wrote a series of pamphlets with the general title *To Christ through the Vedanta*, showing how the search of the Hindu philosopher-theologians will find their answers in Christianity. In Japan, there were efforts to develop a Christian Zen method of meditation. After the Second World War, there were efforts to live an ashram life—Indian monastic life—dialoguing with the cultures and the religions of India. Henri Le Saux and Jules Monchanin from France were the pioneers. At a time, there were more than 60 Christian ashrams across India, though they do not seem to attract the Christian youth as the more active religious groups involved in religious and educational activities and in serving the poor and the socially marginalized by the caste system. Similar efforts were made in Japan too with

¹ For this paragraph see R. H. S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Chennai: Christian Literature Society 1969.

The Impact of the Second Vatican Council

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) was an epoch-making event. From the point of view of mission, its document on the *Liturgy* encouraged and provided principles and structures (unfortunately not fully used) for inculturation in the liturgy and opening the door for inculturation in other areas. Its document on *Mission* deepened our vision and perspectives on mission. Its document on the other religions opened the door to serious and open dialogue with them. Its Constitution on the *Church in the Modern World*, encouraged dialogue with the cultures and other socio-political realities of the world. The Council freed the theologians to explore new possibilities of the mission of the Gospel to the cultures, the religions and the socio-political life of the people.

The new developments can be explored in three stages. First of all, the Second Vatican Council has deepened the vision of mission as God's own mission leading to the Kingdom of God, of which the church is only the symbol and servant. The religions are co-pilgrims marching together, influencing each other, towards the Kingdom. This march is animated by the Spirit of God whom we are called to discern and serve. Secondly, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) has enlarged the field of mission as a three-fold dialogue of the Gospel with the many poor, the rich cultures and the living religions of Asia, leading to the building up of authentic local churches. These three dialogues are obviously inter-related. Thirdly, the challenges we face today are universal in a fast globalizing world, though they may have Asian accents. These are the problems of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, artificial intelligence and secularization, individualism and social inequalities, consumerism and ecology.

When we speak of mission, we immediately think of the missionaries who go on mission to proclaim the good news and convert people. But the Second Vatican Council, when it wants to speak about mission, starts with the church but goes back to Godself. In its document on Mission it says: "The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit" (*Ad gentes* 2). The document goes on to explain how God wants to share God's own life with us, not only as individuals, but as a community built up in the course of history. But this should not lead us to think that the mission of God through the Son and the Spirit is limited to the church. The document on the *Church in the Modern World*, after speaking about the participation of the Christians in the Paschal mystery, goes on to say:

All this holds true not for Christians only but also for all men of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery. (*Gaudium et spes* 22)

As a matter of fact, the document on the *Church* makes a list of people to whom salvation is available which includes everyone, even those who do not belong to any religions. This list concludes:

Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life. (*Lumen gentium* 16)

In his encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, St. John Paul II affirmed formally the presence

and action of the Spirit in other religions and cultures.

The Spirit manifests himself in a special way in the Church and in her members. Nevertheless, his presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space nor time (DEV 53) ... The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions ... Thus, the Spirit, who "blows where he wills" (cf. Jn 3:8), who "was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified" (AG 4), and who "has filled the world ... holds all things together (and) knows what is said (Wis 1:7), leads us to broaden our vision in order to ponder his activity in every time and place (DEV 53) ... The Church's relationship with other religions is dictated by a twofold respect: "Respect for man in his quest for answers to the deepest questions of his life, and respect for the action of the Spirit in man." (RM 28-29)

It is in this context that we have to understand the invitation of St. John Paul II to the leaders of all the world's religions to come to Assisi to pray for world peace. Marcello Zago, the organizer of this event, said:

At Assisi, the welcome given to the religious representatives and people being present at the prayer offered by various religions were in some way a recognition of these religions and of prayer in particular, a recognition that these religions and prayer not only have a social role but are also effective before God.²

God makes sure, therefore, that salvation is made available to everyone in ways unknown to us. It is in this context that it is difficult to understand the statement of the document *Dominus Iesus*, published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,

under the signature of the then Cardinal Ratzinger: "With the coming of the Saviour Jesus Christ, God has willed that the *Church* founded by him be *the instrument* for the salvation of all humanity" (§22, *italics mine*).

The Kingdom of God

The Theology Advisory Committee of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences published a set of *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue* in 1987. Explaining Thesis 2 which accepts religions as "significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation," it says:

Its experience of the other religions has led the Church in Asia to this positive appreciation of their role in the divine economy of salvation. This appreciation is based on the fruits of the Spirit perceived in the lives of the other religions' believers: a sense of the sacred, a commitment to the pursuit of fullness, a thirst for self-realization, a taste for prayer and commitment, a desire for renunciation, a struggle for justice, an urge to basic human goodness, an involvement in service, a total surrender of the self to God, and an attachment to the transcendent in their symbols, rituals and life itself, though human weakness and sin are not absent.

This positive appreciation is further rooted in the conviction of faith that God's plan of salvation for humanity is one and reaches out to all peoples: it is the kingdom of God through which he seeks to reconcile all things with himself in Jesus Christ. The Church is a sacrament of this mystery—a symbolic realization that is on mission towards its fulfilment (LG 1:5; cf. BIRA IV/2). It is an integral part of this mission to discern the action of God in peoples in order to lead them to fulfilment. Dialogue is the only way in which this can be done, respectful both of God's presence and action and of the freedom of conscience of the believers of other religions (cf. LG 10-12;

² See Marcello Zago, Day of Prayer for Peace: *Bulletin of the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions* 22 (1987) 150.

Ecclesiae Sanctae 41-42; RH 11-12).³

The church is therefore the symbol and servant of the Kingdom of God and its mission is precisely to bring all things together. Such bringing together has cosmic dimensions if we keep in mind the vision of St. Paul in his letters to the Ephesians (1:3-10) and to the Colossians (1:15-20). In this project the church needs to collaborate with all the religions and cultures and also other peoples' movements.

The Indonesian Bishops observe: "Since in all religions and traditional religious beliefs the values of God's Reign are found as fruits of the Spirit, to the extent that there is good will they all strive towards the coming of the Kingdom."⁴ The Bishops from the Philippines assert: "In the social context of the great majority of Asian peoples, even more use should be made of the model of the Church as servant, a co-pilgrim in the journey to the Kingdom of God where fullness of life is given as a gift."⁵

The Broadening of Mission

At their first General Assembly in Taipei, Taiwan, 1974, the FABC, preparing for the Synod of Bishops on Evangelization, described it as a threefold dialogue of the Gospel with the many poor, the rich cultures and the living religions of Asia. Missiologists make a distinction between proclamation and dialogue. While the former is unilateral, the latter is multilateral. Today we can say that proclamation itself needs to become dialogical.

Asia is a poor continent, except for some rich islands like Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan. There is not merely economic

poverty, but also social discrimination like the caste system in India, ethnic differences elsewhere and the marginalization and exploitation of women everywhere. Addressing these issues, various liberation theologies have emerged in Asia: Dalit theology in India, other liberation theologies like the theology of the Minjung in South Korea, the theology of Struggle in the Philippines and Women's theologies a little everywhere in Asia. There are also Tribal theologies, since a good majority of the converts to Christianity belong to the poor, marginalized and exploited tribal groups. Another important factor is that in Asia, not only Christians, but also other religious groups have developed theologies of liberation. So, there is not only a possibility, but a need to dialogue and collaborate with the other religious groups in our struggle for liberation.⁶

Asian cultures are rich and diverse. At the official level, especially with regard to ritual, there is not much encouragement from the central authority in the church towards inculturation. But in most countries real inculturation has been happening at the level of popular religiosity and fortunately this has been encouraged, though occasionally one speaks of abuses and exaggerations. Where the priests are with the people some control is always possible. But at the level of theology and spirituality a certain amount of initiatives has taken place. One can speak today of an Asian theology, both in general and in the individual countries. Of course, it has to co-exist with the "official" theology emerging from Rome and some control is not absent. But personal initiatives cannot that easily be controlled, especially when there has been a tradition of independent, creative reflection. There has also been an on-going dialogue between Third World theologians. Inculturation in religious art has its place. Not much production is noticeable

³ See J. Gnanapiragasam/Felix Wilfred (eds.), *Being Church in Asia*, Manila: Claretian Publications 1994, 13.

⁴ Peter C. Phan (ed.), *The Asian Synod. Texts and Commentaries*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2002, 26.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁶ See M. Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom. Liberation Theologies from Asia*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1997.

at the level of literature, since the majority of the Christians are poor people and Christians themselves are small minorities in most societies with Asian systems like Yoga and Zen. Music has taken an important role in popular religiosity.

Among the threefold dialogue of the Gospel with the realities of Asia, a focus on the dialogue with the poor, which I have evoked already, can be said to lead to a sharpening of the vision and practice of mission.

Mission in the Modern World

Much of the talk on inculturation in Asia has focused on the re-expression of the faith in the local cultures, whether indigenous, popular or elite. We have not so far explored the dialogue of the faith with modern scientific and technological culture, which has a universal impact. I think of three stages. First of all, there was the modern world in which were cultural tendencies like globalization, individualism, consumerism, the destruction of creation and secularization. The humans became self-sufficient. Then we had a stage where, besides believers and non-believers, there were people who consider themselves spiritual, but not religious. They had some ethical values. But they did not need an Ultimate Being, whom they consider as controlling their life and restricting their freedom. Today we speak of the Fourth Industrial Revolution animated by Artificial Intelligence, where robots are replacing the humans and eventually the humans themselves tend to become robots. Different people may be at different stages of this development according to the circumstances of their life and work. They may also move from one to another stage.

Technology and egoism mark the first stage. We have to realize that whatever we may be doing we are not machines, but humans-in-community and we have to live and work together. We are mutually dependent in various ways. So, we have to humanize ourselves. A sense of self-sufficiency characterizes the second stage. As long as everything goes well one is not disturbed.

But natural and human catastrophes, serious illnesses, etc. make us realize that there is something or someone beyond, who controls our own and the world's history in ways that are beyond us. Our sense of self-sufficiency and autonomy is illusory. If one does not become aware of it in one's own life, one only has to look around.

Robots and artificial intelligence are highly advanced tools. But they are artificial, not natural. They are created and controlled by the humans for their own purposes. They have no consciousness and responsibility. We need to remain their masters and not become their slaves. In a sense we have to resist and withstand a process of dehumanization in the modern world. Otherwise the humans themselves will become machines. This is what is happening in our factories which are becoming sorts of concentration camps, where the humans become instruments. The modern world, therefore, is bringing a lot of new challenges in mission.

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(Ref: *Verbum SVD*, Fasciculus 1, Volumen 62, 2021, pp. 13 – 20)

A Vision for the Future of Religious Life

Called to Restore!

Sowers of Prophetic Hope, here we are! I am grateful for the invitation to be here today, to the UISG President Sr. Carmen Sammut, MSOLA, and the UISG board, and to Sr. Patricia Murray, IBVM, thank you for your trust. As we begin our assembly today, I know hope is in this room simply because we are gathered.

I prayed, struggled, and consulted about this reflection, wondering what gives me hope? What is hope? How do we hope together as women religious? How do we hope in the vision of the emerging future? A few stories came to mind, over and over again, little stories, local stories, simple stories. Pondering them, in my different moments of despair, I began to find hope, and perhaps I am beginning to understand how the vision of the future of our life unfolds around us gently, softly, like my little stories.

The first happened after hurricane Maria had devastated my beloved island of Puerto Rico. My Boricua friends desperately writing on *Facebook* and *Twitter* trying to communicate with loved ones, “*does anyone know if...*”, “*can you communicate.*” During the terrible weeks that ensued, I happened on a story about an organization that was working to restore the magnificent coral reef destroyed by the winds — volunteer divers carrying little buckets, restoring one coral at a time. My first reaction was a cynical smile, how ridiculous and futile. I just wanted to cry because that beautiful Puerto Rican rainforest and its breathtaking coral reef were gone, and here are these fools; what could they ever achieve?! And, suddenly, gently, I felt it—the hope, the call: simple efforts, the seed of hope. They were restoring the dignity of creation, one coral at a time!

My next story happened during a trip to the Mexico-United States Border with all the

sisters from our religious leadership conference’s region in Texas. We visited with the agencies and organizations that have been working to welcome the men, women, and children seeking hospitality in our country. Sister Norma Pimentel, director of Catholic Charities for the Rio Grande Valley, shared her story with our group. When the first wave of unaccompanied minors reached the border, she hustled to create a welcome center in a parish. Calls for help went out, volunteers and donations started coming in. Everyone was busy when the local authorities came and asked Sr Norma, “*what is going on here?*” She replied: “*I am restoring human dignity.*” The men left and returned with more volunteers and donations. Again, as I heard Sr. Norma, I thought, thousands of people, thousands of children, overwhelming numbers. How on earth are we going to welcome them all? And, again, simple hospitality, another seed of hope. At the Mexico-U.S. border, they are restoring human dignity, one person at a time!

My third story comes from Colombia. Visiting Cali, I heard about the long and painful peace process after the cartels, the military, and hired paramilitary had left cities and families scourged by their bloody and violent confrontations. A group of women has been breeding butterflies to work for peace in an organization called *Alas Nuevas*. They gave me a beautiful butterfly, and as I looked at it, I wondered, how can breeding butterflies make a difference in such a traumatized place? And again, gently, simply, hope came upon me. They are restoring peace, one butterfly at a time!

We need to hope as they do, standing firmly and humbly in this painful and overwhelming present reality that is ours, with bare feet. This time that has normalized crisis is our holy ground. Among all the

different crises we are called to live and hope in, the one close to our hearts must be named from the start of this conference: the crisis in our Church. History will judge how we responded to this crisis. One day, women religious will be either accomplices, or prophets, or victims. We simply cannot sit this one out on the sidelines, even when we are being sidelined!

Here we are called to hope in the vision of God for the future. We need to go through this time together, religious women called to communion, called to the discipleship of Jesus, called to be sacraments of the presence of God in our world, consecrated women. We can only hope as religious; we hope because we are religious.

Sisters, we are gathered here to share our stories. What stories can we tell one another about receiving the gift of hope? For hope is a gift given gently, simply, in the midst of despair. A gift we must notice, receive and make real for each other in the sharing. Our gift of hope will overcome fear. We must tell these stories of the simple, quiet, gentle prophecy of compassion that restores, that tells the surprising truth of what God is already doing among us!

I suggest with this reflection that the prophecy of compassion will get us to hope provided we hold a VISION, foster our MEMORY, cultivate our NOTICING, and dare to LEAD.

VISION: To See with Prophetic Hope

Our Assembly calls us to be “*Sowers of Prophetic Hope*” This week we need to reflect with each other, how do we hope as women of the Church? We know “*hope is the gift of communion*,” as I reminded our conference in the United States last year. Hope is the result of the encounter of community. Gustavo Gutierrez writes that “Hope is a gift, a grace, and when we receive a gift, it is not for us; it is for our neighbour.” With faith we must seek the vision of hope found in Jeremiah: God promises a “future with hope” if we seek with all our heart (Jr, 29:11-13, NRSV). LCWR, our conference in the United States, has learned that this vision

of the heart can only be found by tapping the spiritual wisdom of our life in contemplation, engaging in communal discernment. Women religious must be women of vision: seers of hope.

This vision of hope for our challenged and suffering present and for a future filled with life requires that we enter deeply into the mystery of our consecrated life. We hold a public commitment to discipleship in communion, as stated in *Vita Consecrata*: “The fraternal life, understood as a life shared in love, is an eloquent sign of ecclesial communion.”¹ Our exodus journey of renewal that began with *Vatican II* has been a beautiful gift with unyielding challenges; questions about style, ministry, and orthodoxy have fascinated and haunted us. The Plenary Session on the occasion of the 50 years since *Perfectae Caritatis*, held by Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, recognized that:

Even after the wide-ranging and rich process of adaptation and renewal [*accomodata renovatio*] which took place after the Council, the consecrated life may still find itself presented with open challenges that must be faced “with determination and an eye to the future.”²

“*Who are we? Where are we going?*”— are unyielding questions that have divided and haunted us. The renewal debate needs to be left to rest for the sake of the vision of the Reign of God we were called to witness, the people of our time are desperate for hope.

The vision of hope in the promises of Christ requires living into our principles not answers. We are required to live with a nobility of spirit, into the grace and mystery of our consecration. The time for major “undertakings” or apostolic works is over, remembering Sr. Marian Ambrosio’s

¹ *Vita Consecrata*, No. 42.

² Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *New Wine in New Wineskins: The Consecrated Life and its Ongoing Challenges since Vatican II*, Guidelines, 2018, introduction.

beautiful loom - three years ago in this very room—” we are to live into the ‘power of the how.’”³ We will journey to the promise of hope by remaining steadfast in our identity. We need to be women of character and virtue now more than ever. To find hope we need to be prophetic, and to be prophetic, our lives need to witness to what we believe and who we are. The way to hope is through prophecy. How do we prophesy as women religious?

The time for words is over, so forgive the ones I am using here! We need a new way of witnessing that will manifest our values, that will be more intelligible and accessible for our time. Gospel news needs to be told in art, symbol and gesture. These are times to share the kind of deep meaning that cannot be found in words. A friend reminded me that the crisis around the world could not be reasoned or problem solved. We need to give our rational minds a sabbatical so that the creative, non-linear, subconscious can help us navigate through story, poetry, art, symbol, and gesture. We have a new apostolic call to offer meaning to a suffering world, with the non-verbal language that our consecrated life can speak with such beauty. We need to offer a prophecy the world can see.

The vision for this kind of prophecy will emerge from the narrative of hope embedded deep in the soul of our charisms. We are a people with a vision, a vision of the love and compassion of God for all creation. Women religious, as we are, young and old, many and sparse, must witness to compassion, like the people in my little stories. Our prophetic vision is in our hearts, hands, and feet. The places we walk, the people we touch, the way we accompany, the prayers we pray, tell the story of compassion embedded in the hope for the Reign of God, where Jesus calls us to follow. We witness restoring dignity to all human beings, to our planet, one simple,

³ Márian Ambrosio, IDP, “Weaving Solidarity for Life-Living and Witnessing as Women Religious of Apostolic Life”. “Tejiendo una Solidaridad para la Vida - Para vivir y dar testimonio como religiosas de vida apostólica,” UISG Plenary Assembly 2016.

loving spiritual act of compassion at a time. Jose Antonio Pagola writes that “for Jesus, compassion is not just one more virtue, but rather the only way to imitate God, the only way to see the world, to treat people and to react to human beings in a manner most like God’s.”⁴ Our way to prophecy is through compassion. Compassion all can see, not read or hear, but simply see. We need not do anything more, or anything less.

Prophecy and hope dance in the endless cycle compassion weaves into the future promised by God. Our small simple acts of compassion offer this vision of creation to every single human being as prophecy because we believe!

MEMORY: To Trust our Prophetic Call

The future of religious life is embedded in our memory! For too long we have been obsessed with the future. I cannot even count how many books I have read about the future of religious life, and I can read only in two languages! We have been asking about the future far too long. And yes, we have been worried about the future; in fact, we have been downright afraid of the future. Something went amiss after the fervor that followed the Vatican Council; this was not supposed to happen. Our respective responses, enthusiastic or not, were expected to bring about a new heaven and a new earth!⁵ We have played numbers games with statistics and projections. Our questions about size betray our insecurities, our fear of the future: “*we have more, you have less,*” “*how many novices,*” “*how many ministries*”. We have played this game

⁴ Jose Antonio Pagola, *Recuperar el Proyecto de Jesús*, PPC, 2015, Kindle, Loc. 823. Translation Mine.

⁵ Simon Pedro Arnold has spoken of this in Latin America, during the 80s he says “We assisted to what could be called the loss of illusions. Far from embracing the libertarian proposals, the poor accommodated and adapted to the “pots from Egypt,” preferring the security of neoliberal slavery to the unconverged hypothetical freedom,” *¿A dónde vamos? Una teología de la vida consagrada para un tiempo de crisis y esperanza*, Paulinas, 2012, p. 49. Translation mine.

across institutes, conferences, hemispheres, for so many years, I wonder when we will get off the useless merry-go-round that has exhausted our creative and spiritual energy. We need a collective *examen*, as women religious, but also as a Church, to own the demons that have driven our ridiculous quest for numeric significance. I hope to thank Pope Francis one day for saying that our “founders and foundresses never thought they'd be a multitude”⁶ All the time we have spent on numbers reminds me of the mirror in the *Snow White* narrative, “*mirror, mirror on the wall who is the fairest one of them all.*” Pride is unbecoming to our life, but it has been so tempting, so shiny!

I offer a different lens instead: The quest for the future must begin by remembering. To understand the future, we need to take time to remember. “Remember” in Spanish comes from *re-cordis*, to run through the heart once more. We need to “*re-cordar.*” Memory is the sacrament of presence. As leaders, we must call our sisters to sacred memory and dialogue with our cloud of witnesses to believe in our future. We need to enter into the mystery of our memory, sometimes selective, sometimes painful, sometimes hidden. We need to tell and retell the stories that made us: our pioneer stories, our founding stories, our stories of renewal and conflict; we will find the seeds of hope we need to sow there. How do we remember as a community?

A historian friend of mine warned me about our utilitarian use of history. We tell stories not to find the way, not because we need to solve a problem; not as a nostalgic view of what is gone; we tell stories to know who we are! She pointed me to Umberto Eco's reflection about the forest. In a short essay, he wrote that there are two ways to enter the narrative forest:

The first is to try one of several routes (so as to get out of the woods as fast as possible,

say, or to reach the house of grandmother, Tom Thumb, or Hansel and Gretel); the second is to walk so as to discover what the woods are like and find out why some paths are accessible and others are not.... We enter stories in much the same way; the first kind of reader enters the text seeking to know “how the story ends”... so it is usually enough to read it once. In contrast, to identify the model author, the text needs to be read many times, and certain stories endlessly.⁷

Our most sacred responsibility as leaders of religious institutes lies in symbol and meaning-making. We need to be artisan storytellers so we remember who we are.

When Sister Veronica Openibo, leader of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, addressed the Vatican Summit on abuse, again I was filled with hope. We all stood with her as she witnessed for women the world over. Last month I was in Rome, and thought of her as I stood before every statue of a woman I could find in St. Peter's Basilica after the celebration of the Eucharist. Wandering from one pillar to the next, I prayed to each of them, and asked what witness got you to this place? How did you hope? And, what will we discover about ourselves in dialogue with your stories?

Listening to Sister Veronica, and reflecting on the history of our Church women, I realized why memory is critical at this time. The story of Sr Juana Ines de la Cruz, a seventeenth-century Mexican nun, living in a cloistered convent of the Spanish Colonial period came immediately to mind. Challenged by the Archbishop of Puebla about women and learning, she wrote a defense known as the *Letter to Sister Filotea de la Cruz*. What she did was to remember the story of all the women who had come before her!⁸ Like other learned women of the

⁶ Cindy Wooden, “Spread hope, preach Christ, don't worry about numbers pope says”, CNS, 2017, <<http://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2017/spread-hope-preach-christ-dont-worry-about-numbers-pope-says.cfm>>.

⁷ Umberto Eco, “the Woods of Loisy”, in *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, Harvard, 1994.

⁸ Sor Juana Ines writes in defense of her writing by remembering all the learned women from antiquity and then the Christian tradition, *Respuesta a la Carta de Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, 1691. The University of Georgia has her works on line at:

Church, she found the strength to resist in her stories. Their power allowed her to acknowledge the gifts that God had given her, and to this day her poetry and learning challenges and mystifies historians and critics.

While in Rome, I made a pilgrimage to the tomb of one of those women, St. Catherine of Siena, to pray for guidance, to remember this moment in our Church is not unique, that hundreds of years later, the questions about the role of women in the Church continue to claim our attention. We need to bring forward the names of the resilient women who came before us, just like Sor Juana did. We need to remember them, to make them present to the current situation in the Church, not because we want a place at the table of clericalism, but because we are called to make the Church whole! The litany of the women of the Church that have challenged us and called us forth must be prayed in our institutes. The sacrament of memory will make them a real presence in our world today.

I invite you to consider the women of your traditions we need to invoke at a time such as this. Who are the women in every continent, in your institute, whom you remember, whose names need to be recited and invoked at this time?

But we also need to remember the women who have been resilient in the face of terrible odds, women of the margins, indigenous women, enslaved women, abused women. We must honour their names as well. The images that emerged around the world from the most recent *Women's Day* come to mind.⁹ All of them echo the words of Sojourner Truth, the nineteenth century African American abolitionist who fought against slavery in the United States and challenged white women by saying: “*Ain't I a*

woman.”¹⁰ Women the world over are showing this resiliency; they continue to be pillars in the face of incredible adversity and suffering. We need to remember that women everywhere of every culture and faith, in every hemisphere, stand again and again as prophets of compassion. Their story is also our story!

So much has happened since the last UISG meeting. The headlines in country after country have claimed our attention and should challenge us. Recovering our memory should also help us with the divisive and myopic concern about feminism that we frequently hear voiced in society and our Church. Perhaps now we need to recover the memory of our feminist legacy. Precisely at this time when all institutions around the globe are challenged to ensure the dignity of human beings is always protected, our feminist legacy has a word of integrity to offer. *We should all be feminists, our brothers, and fathers, and priests should be feminists!* Yes, I said it, religious sisters should all be feminists, Christian feminists, who committed to struggle and resist to ensure that women and men, and children are all treated as human beings. We need the feminism of compassion found in the stories that have inspired our courage as women religious over the centuries. These stories began long ago with Jesus and the women he encountered. Women who teach us to treat women like Jesus did, respectfully, lovingly. Women who, like Jesus, teach us to take counsel from Mary, his mother, advising him at the wedding in Cana. Women who, like Jesus, teach us to find wisdom in women like the Samaritan at the well; Women who, like Jesus, teach us to accept the challenges of the Syrophenician woman; and women who call us to notice suffering like he did when the haemorrhaging woman touched him. Christian feminism calls us to love, trust, and challenge the men who journey with us. Adopting a feminist perspective will actually make us more faithful to God, our church,

<https://www.ensayistas.org/consejo/about.htm>.

⁹ An example is the exhibit “Mujeres que no bajan los brazos: Historias de mujeres resilientes y valientes,” Medicos sin Fronteras,

<https://www.msf.mx/event/esposicion-mujeres-que-no-bajan-los-brazos>

¹⁰ Aint I a Woman, Sojourner Truth, 1851 Women's Convention Akron Ohio.

our communities, and our families.

We need to remember that Christian feminism finds inspiration in the Genesis story, recognizing that half of all those created in the divine image and likeness of God are undervalued in nearly every social, civic, political - and certainly every ecclesial arena. Christian feminism calls us to notice that women bear the effects of poverty, illness, and violence in disproportionate degrees in nearly every country in the world - and we need to change that reality. We need to embrace the cause of women because we are women religious and this is like Johann Metz said, our “dangerous memory.”¹¹

As women religious, we need to join women around the world in their effort to humanize their lives. I bring to mind the images of women dancing to resist violence, the *One Billion Rising Revolution*,¹² Have we danced with them? Women need us as we are, fewer and older, but present. Memory will remind us, that their cause has been our cause: standing with women who are vulnerable to violence and marginalization is our story. We cannot be absent from the forums where women are in conversation about bringing about the humanization of all peoples, that echoes the touch, friendship and validation of

women by Jesus in the Gospels. We have to share with them the stories of our women, our sisters, who fought in the face of adversity as prophets of compassion. We need to return to our storytelling of the women of faith, the women of wisdom, the women of spirit, on whose shoulders we stand. We need to tell the stories of courage of the women in our institutes who journey with other women creating and sowing hope simply, hopefully, and respectfully. Sister Andrea Lee, IHM, President of Alverno College, recently spoke about these women saying:

We respect each other, enjoy each other and support each other, right until the moment we yield each sister to the welcoming arms of the Lord at the moment of her death. It is that good and that powerful. That very evident strength and what it is capable of accomplishing is part of what drew me to religious life. Watching women teach each other; wanting them to teach me. Seeing joy, goodness, intelligence and commitment coalesce. Slowly coming to see that the power, the boldness we could have together, is power and boldness none of us would have alone. Embarking on a lifelong adventure with like-minded women. Good and wise women taught me that. And that is part of how I came to be where I am today.¹³

Sister Andrea did not say this, but I will: I am sure they were all Christian feminists, like we should be!

Memory will bring out so many stories: the women of the Bible, of our Church, of our institutes, of our time, will speak to us of faith and courage, and resiliency. The call to remember lies beyond the careful narrative of complementarity or even collaboration, this is about the mission of humanization. We need to join our hands, our voices, and our prayer to every cause that restores human dignity because we remember who we are.

¹¹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All be Feminists*, Vintage Books, 2014. She says in the book published from her TED talk: “Gender as it functions today is a grave injustice. I am angry. We should all be angry. Anger has a long history of bringing about positive change. In addition to anger, I am also hopeful, because I believe deeply in the ability of human beings to remake themselves for the better.” P. 21.

¹² “One Billion Rising is the biggest mass action to end violence against women (cisgender, transgender, and those who hold fluid identities that are subject to gender-based violence) in human history. The campaign, which launched on Valentine’s Day 2012, began as a call to action based on the staggering statistic that 1 in 3 women on the planet will be beaten or raped during her lifetime. With the world population at 7 billion, this adds up to more than One Billion Women and Girls.” <https://www.onebillionrising.org/about/campaign/one-billion-rising/>.

¹³ Andrea Lee, IHM, “Profundo Encuentro: An Adventure of Many Surprises”, National Catholic Sisters Week, March 10. 2019.

As leaders, for example, we should be champions of the *Talita Kum* networks in our countries. But humanization also needs to happen within our institutes. We need to honestly share our stories of complicity and silence, because we have them. We need to lead into transparency and accountability in every area of our institute's life. We need to tell our ongoing story of struggle and courage to build up the Reign of God in the midst of our own Church.

Our memory will inspire our courage. Religious women bear a responsibility for the integrity of human life in their DNA. The time for standing as women with other women is now. The time for standing at the foot of the cross of suffering of so many is now, like the women that have come before us. Otherwise, the compassionate humanization that Jesus called us to witness might be lost on a new generation of women who need to know why we remain self-respecting women who are Catholic.

NOTICING: To live our moment fully

We have been called to lead during a time of profound transformation. I do not need to say this to you as leaders of your institutes. Is this transformation more significant or less than others? Historians will remind us that it is not, but this is the one we get to live through! Whether it is the most significant or not matters little. Change is everywhere — big, massive, challenging, often scary. Borders are changing, maps are changing, the world is “moving,” massive migrations of people, ideas and goods are now possible like never before. Even climate and our understanding of gender are changing. And, the Church which I confess I thought would take another century to ask itself some critical questions, is now asking them! Could it be that our Church is also on the brink of change? Movement will describe our time. Leading when everything is moving requires a whole new set of skills, leading a religious institute looks different than it did before or after the Council. The global south looks different because it is not the same before as

after colonial rule, or before and after the missionaries left. No matter what focus or angle we use, these are different times!

We need to be horizon watchers! We keep watch for dawn because we believe, because we know the night will end. “However long the night”¹⁴, we persevere because we believe the gift of God, the gift of hope, will be ours. We need to be spiritual sentinels for all humanity. On the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated life offered us the document “*Scrutate*”, *Keep Watch!*, calling us: “To search the horizons of our life and our times, in watchful prayer; to peer into the night in order to recognize the fire that illuminates and guides, to gaze into the heavens, looking for the heralds of blessing for our dryness. To keep awake and watch, and to make intercession, firm in our faith.”¹⁵

To respond to our call to prophesy so we can journey into hope, we must lean into our contemplative identity; we must notice everything! Noticing contemplatively is a new asceticism; noticing with prophetic hope requires a long loving look that holds everything before it, no matter how strange, painful or different. We need to be the advance of the *Iglesia en Salida*, the Church that goes forth, because of who we are. The future of our life as religious will be intimately related to our courage to enter into a spirituality of noticing how God's spirit is stirring new insights and hope around us.

¹⁴ LCWR published a book sharing the experience of the conference during the Vatican Investigation, the sisters wrote they learned that: “That the Spirit works in and through groups, not solely through individuals. That contemplation is a powerful gift from God. That God loves not only us, but also those in conflict with us, equally and extravagantly. However long the night, we were made for these times.” *However Long the Night: Making Meaning in a Time of Crisis*, LCWR, 2018, p.10.

¹⁵ *Keep Watch!*, Congregation of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2014, No. 1.

We need to start by noticing the shifts that are taking place in religious life, overcoming the usual temptations of leadership. The temptation to stay busy with minor tasks that are important but not critical. The temptation to nostalgia, to keep rewinding the videos, when we *used to*, when we *had*, or *were*, or *did*; obsessed with declining numbers and aging, only focused on what is dying. The temptation of our good works! We have done amazing work for our church and the countries we serve: built and staffed healthcare ministries big and small, taught generations of children, but maintaining the “ministries,” however important, can also keep us from noticing the amazing movements taking place before us. The temptations make us short-sighted; they blur the capacity to notice the new.

Overcoming the core temptations of leadership, we might then begin to notice joyfully what is emerging around us — the “shift” of energy for religious life from the global north to the global south. The fourth wave of religious migration currently underway differs from the sixteenth and nineteenth-century missionary migrations, because it is flowing in the opposite direction, or could it be in the right direction today!¹⁶ The entire center of gravity of the Church is moving south, and our noticing is “colored” by our prejudice. How many more times do I have to hear about women seeking entrance to our congregations from countries in the global south that: “*they only want a visa, or an education, or a comfortable life*”? How many times will I hear that “*celibacy is a challenge in their culture*” but clearly not ours?

We also need to notice how we notice!

We need to be asking the right questions, not because we will find the answers but because

questions will guide our noticing. Where is the need? What is ours to do? Who are we today? Who are we globally? How are we globally? Where are we being invited to collaborate, network, build bridges within and across religious life?

A spirituality of noticing will move us to the small meaningful acts of compassion that restore hope. Then we will join the restorers around us, restoring creation, human dignity and peace, one little step at a time!

SOW: To Own our Call as Leaders

The seeds of prophetic hope need to be planted, watered, and tended. This work requires leadership. As UISG convenes the leadership of women religious institutes from the whole world, here we are, the supreme moderators, the general superiors, the leaders of our communities. What is ours to do so we can continue that journey to hope? We have a legacy of leadership. Sisters have been in leadership roles for centuries in institutions, ministries and pastoral work long before women could vote, register in a university, or even own property. This is our legacy; our story is proof that women can lead even in the Church! And when they do, they weave solidarity and sow hope!

We sow hope by doing what is ours to do as leaders elected by our institutes. We are women in the service of leadership, called by our sisters to serve our charism. We need to own this leadership with integrity together with our councils. We lead into a vision of hope by convening, advocating, calling forth, inviting, gathering, inviting to see the whole! We need to dare to lead, as Brené Brown defines a leader as “anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes, and who has the courage to develop that potential.”¹⁷ Our sisters have called us to lead, someone else can plan a funeral or rearrange the furniture

¹⁶ See Mary Johnson's et al new book, *Migration for Mission: International Catholic Sisters in the United States*, Oxford, 2019.

¹⁷ Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead, Brave Work, Tough Conversations*, Whole Hearts, Random House, 2018, p.4.

in the motherhouse. Of course, we call forth the gifts of others; we take counsel; we delegate, and we must lead into community. Leadership in our religious institutes must foster, care, nurture, and create the sacred space that will ensure community, collegiality, and collaboration. The future of hope promised in Isaiah is embedded in communion. Hope is the gift of communion!

To sow hope, we need to lead our way out of our version of clericalism. We need to do our work, name it, call it and confess it. We need to work hard to expel the demons around the service of authority, by exercising the kind of prophetic leadership that will sow hope. We must both recognize the authoritarianism and also call out the rogue individualism that breeds around it. The conference celebrating 50 years since *Perfectae Caritatis*, had some serious admonitions about the abuse of authority in our institutes.¹⁸ An honest examination of conscience will identify the shadow side of our exercise of authority found: in all our institutes. While respectful of culture, we should never use it to justify abuse of authority, favoritism, or even the “new tribalism” that is emerging among us, where belonging requires ideological alignment and which is prone to condemnation of the other and polarization. Our turn to lead is now, we are called as custodians of the body which is the congregation. I pray that when it is our turn to hand on the leadership of our respective institutes, we will do so with a healthier understanding of the vulnerability of its power and authority.

We can offer something from our collective wisdom, our years of discussion, our special chapters, our efforts to make the renewal called for by the Vatican Council real and tangible. Our institutes have been slowly, painfully, sometimes even comically moving

from vertical models for authority to horizontal, even circular models. We need to lead this shift- to sow hope! Respectful of legitimate authority, we have learned to share our gifts. But none of this can happen if we do not assume the responsibility given to us by our institute, if we are not the ultimate “moderators” of our community.

We are leading a life in motion! We cannot afford the time to dock our respective fleets; instead, we need to sail, and repair as we go. We need to lead into a “both-and” where we continue to encourage the transformation and yet offer our sisters sufficient structural certainty that will hold the movement. Vicki Wuolle, CSA images this by saying: “I often refer to the experience as building the ship while we sail, which is an image that helps us in holding the balance between having enough structure in place to offer support to the mission we serve, while also being fluid enough to allow ourselves to be shaped by the reality.”¹⁹ We need to lead beyond the hierarchical model, where we are still the “reverend mother” surrounded by “obedient daughters”- beyond the “tyranny of consensus”²⁰ where because sometimes when there is a leader in every chair, there is no leader! Hope will not thrive in communities with absolute leaders or in leaderless communities. We need to lead into a new way of exercising authority, not by shying away from it, not by hiding behind the flower arrangements for the next feast, but by daring to be real, daring to lead from our vulnerability. We need to be real and honest about ourselves in leadership, the days we wonder why, the days we cannot see the way forward, the overwhelming and grief filled days.

We need to lead into collegiality, collaboration, and networking like never before! The model of solidarity that UISG

¹⁸ *New Wine in New Wineskins: The Consecrated Life and its Ongoing Challenges Since Vatican II*, Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2018, see numbers 19-28.

¹⁹ Vicki Wuolle, CSA, “Leading: Com (with) passion(suffering),” *LCWR Occasional Papers*, Winder 2019, p. 25.

²⁰ Marissa Guerin, “Resisting the Tyranny of Inclusion in Organizations”, Blog April 12, 2018, <https://www.guerinconsulting.com/blog/resisting-the-tyranny-of-inclusion>.

represents needs to be owned and cultivated. We have been convened; this assembly is a place of collegiality. I would even dare to say synodality! Both collegiality and collaboration also need leadership. One of the most sacred responsibilities we hold is “connecting/networking” our institutes with other institutes, with our conferences, with religious around the world, with other organizations, and of course with the Church. I pray that when Pat Murray comes to the United States in August, she will challenge us to do just that: weave global solidarity. Leaders have the privilege of seeing the whole; leaders have the privilege of meeting other leaders. Sisters, may this Assembly be more than a photo-op with Pope Francis! May this Assembly motivate us to enter into our role as leaders of collegiality and collaboration.

We lead so we can witness to compassion as a congregational body. We collaborate and network so that this journey of prophetic compassion can lead us to a future filled with hope!

CONCLUSION: Called to Restore Simply, Gently

Movement is all around us. The ground beneath us is shifting. The institutions that have shaped much of our lives are required to enter into a profound examination of conscience. Just beyond the challenges that will transform religious life, just beyond, we will begin to see the dawn. A new smaller, more nimble but global religious life is emerging. Leadership will come from a different hemisphere; new cultures will inspire our charisms. The shift has begun and will probably be complete in our lifetimes, perhaps even during our tenure as leaders. And, all this is happening in the midst of massive changes in our world, our countries, and hopefully also our Church. We know this! Perhaps this is why we came to this Assembly to find inspiration in one another, to encourage and call forth, to know deeply, and profoundly that this moment must be faced in collaboration and collegiality.

Pope Francis offered a TED talk where he said that the future has a name, and the name

of the future is hope!²¹ We need to lead our institutes in this faith because we love our charism, our sisters, and those we serve. We lead because we remember, and we lead to create memory. Can we journey into this new time trusting that the core of our stories will be retold in new and creative ways as the new maps emerge and get redrawn? Can we hope as the center of gravity of religious life shifts to the south making a new future possible, less homogenous, less Euro-centric, more diverse, more colorful, more like God’s creation?

We are called as leaders by our communities to lead at this time of great movement is. Are we ready and willing? Can we be brave enough to retell our stories of compassion and courage? Can we show our sisters how they are and have been the soil from which new life will emerge? I believe that when we trust our own stories, when we trust our voice as women, when we stand in our faith in the gift of hope— we will join all those quiet men and women who are gently, simply, lovingly restoring creation, restoring peace and restoring human dignity.

We too will breed beautiful, small and frail butterflies!

(Ref: UISG, Number 169, 2019, pp.14 -24)

²¹ Pope Francis, “Why the only future worth building includes everyone”, 2017, https://www.ted.com/talks/his_holiness_pope_francis_why_the_only_future_worth_building_includes_everyone/transcript?language=en .

A Re-Look at the Mission Concept and Missiology

Introduction

Church and mission have come to be seen as two sides of the same coin, and rightly so. However, while in the West, by and large, mission continues to be a highly esteemed engagement, in the East, more so in the Asian countries, for the followers of other religions, mission is the by-product of colonial conquest, a social and political instrument to displace their religions with Christianity. All service of the Christian community comes to be interpreted as 'conversion' work, along with the claims of possessing the exclusive way of salvation. All this makes mission one of the most contemptuous concepts in the religious world of Asia.

Origin of 'Mission'

The mission theology that is developed and taught in contemporary times, for the most part, has its origin in western colonialism. The 'discovery' of the new lands made European Christians painfully aware of the existence of vast lands populated by the followers of other religions, both organized and tribal. The European Christian estimate of these people can best be understood from a letter that the then Franciscan Superior wrote while sending the Franciscans to the 'new world' in 1523. He spoke of the urgent need to save the souls of the poor heathens, the vintage "being gathered by the devil and the flesh," depriving Christ "of enjoying the possession of the souls which he purchased with his blood."¹ It was founded on the theology of St. Anselm, the father of the western theology. His work, *Cur Deus Homo?* (Why God became a Man, completed

in 1098), advocated satisfaction/atonement as the justification for the Incarnation, contributing to a radical deviation of the Church's life and service.

The term mission, as understood today, originated from the "Vow of Mission" that St. Ignatius imposed on the Jesuits, with the meaning that the Jesuits would be prepared to carry out any assignment that the Pope would mandate them to do or to go anywhere in the world the Pope would send them, contemporaneous with the colonial forays. Similarly, Missiology as a theological discipline began only with Gustav Wameck and Josef Schmidlin, by the end of the 19th century, as the theological discipline to justify and promote the type of work that the Church adopted ensuing the colonial forays. Interestingly, the Christianity of the colonial days did not pay much attention to the fact that Europe became Christian by the will of the ruler, a practice that had its precedence in Emperor Constantine, who made Christianity the official religion of the state and his successor Theodosius making it the only religion allowed in the empire.

Return to the Roots

The Lord of the Church had described the Church as a "little flock" (Lk 12:32), that must serve the world as its light, salt and leaven (Mt 5:13,14), the recipe for the messianic transformation of the world. The community at the earliest stage had this sense of impacting the world through its lifestyle, which it described as "what soul to the body, that we are to the world."² In fact, St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians reminds them to be "the fragrance of Christ" (2 Cor 2:15). All these images indicate the quality of life and the impact of the Church on the world, on the one hand, and the

¹ Letter of Franciscan General, Francisco de los Angeles in 1523, quoted in H. McKennie, *Goodpasture, Cross and Sword: An Eyewitness History of Christianity in Latin America* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 20.

² *Letter to Diognetus*, 6, quoted in Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 38.

minority status of the Church, on the other.

When we come to the ministry of Jesus as presented by the evangelists, it was focused on the divine reign. “The Kingdom has come” (Mk 1:15). The Gospel is the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. It is a person. The inaugurated Kingdom that God is bodily present in Jesus of Nazareth. Mark, in particular, emphasizes the ministry, the deeds of Jesus, rather than the teaching of Jesus. He is the path to God (Jn 14:6) whom he manifested through his ministry (Jn 1:18; 14:9).

The message of the Kingdom was an invitation to the people to accept it through a corresponding change of lifestyle, based on love and compassion, linking it with the great biblical theme of the Jubilee Year, though now it is not just another Jubilee, but *the* Jubilee: “the acceptable year of the Lord” (Lk 4:19; cf. Lev 25:8ff). It was the ‘manifesto’ of Jesus. Jubilee was the good news primarily for the poor who had lost their land or who had become slaves. Jubilee retrieved the original equality and fraternity that the Israelites had when they came to the Promised Land. Through the power of God’s Spirit, Jesus spelt this out through his announcing the good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and setting at liberty those who were oppressed, all those who were excluded from the mainstream society (Lk 4:18-19).

Similarly, when John the Baptist, languishing in the prison, sent his disciples to Jesus asking if he were truly the Messiah, or if they are to look for someone else, Jesus’ reply was: “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them” (Lk 7:22). In the same vein, responding to the Pharisees who warned Jesus of Herod’s plans to kill him, he said: “Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course’” (Lk 13:32). No wonder, Peter’s summary of the entire ministry of Jesus in Cornelius’ house is: “He went about doing

good healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (Acts 10:39).

The biblical idea of salvation and the naming of God or Jesus as saviour are to be understood from this integral sense. No wonder, Cyrus, the Persian king who sent the Israelites back to their own land from the Babylonian captivity, is called a saviour (Isa 44:24-45:8). Continuing that tradition of salvation and redemption, Jesus begins his ministry with his baptism in Jordan, opposite to Jericho (Jn 1:29), the same place where Joshua led the people into the new land of freedom and equality (Josh 3:16), where each could live in safety, under his vine and under his fig tree (1 Kings 4:25).

This ideal situation was shattered by human selfishness, leading to exile (Jer 16:1 Off.), and at the time of Jesus, making the Jews a nation of empty legalism and ritual purity, with little concern for the poor, the excluded ones and those suffering from injustices. It is in this context that Jesus enters the scene with the message of the arrival of the Kingdom.

Jesus’ ministry was centred on accepting the neighbour with his/her dignity and rights, and it is inbuilt into Christian discipleship. This was unfolded all through the ministry of Jesus Christ. Nowhere in the gospels do we come across Jesus saying that he has come to give his life as a ransom³ for the humans to have the heaven opened up for them as presumed by many writers. On the contrary, in the face of the rigour of the religious leaders of the time, Jesus was a sympathizer and champion of freedom over regulations, human well-being over religious rigour and the scrupulous observance of rituals (Mk 2:23—3:5; 7:1-23; 9:33-37; 10:2-12, etc.).

When Zacchaeus, the tax collector, following Jesus’ teachings, had donated half of his property to the poor and restored fourfold any ill-gotten wealth, the Lord comments that salvation has come to him on that day (Lk 19:9). Jesus was still alive and the

³ Mk 10:45 is to be situated in the context of service to the neighbour rather than lording over others. The whole ministry of Jesus was focused on service and that led him to the cross (Mk 3:6; 11:18; 12:13, etc.)

salvation that he referred had to do with life on earth as well.

Jesus did create a new community to be sent out to continue his own work (Mk 3:14-15; Jn 20:21; Acts 1:7-8). The members of the community earned this out faithfully, by sharing their Kingdom experience with others (1 Jn 1:1-4). The mighty deeds and proclamation of Jesus were continued through the community of the disciples as narrated in the Acts of the Apostles. That kingdom- ministry has to be continued through the Church at all times and everywhere. As the Syrophenician woman insisted (Mk 7:24- 30), the benefits of the divine reign must be made available to all, more so to the discarded ones of the modern human society. The Church has to be present in all cultures (Mt 28:19ff.).



**The community of the Divine Word
Missionaries**

It is not a question of agonizing over the destiny of the non- Christians or bringing all into one's own Church to rocket them to an otherworldly salvation. It is a service whereby all humans, more so the excluded ones of the society can experience the benefits of the arrival of the divine reign - when all can feel accepted and respected, without the least denial of one's human rights, as children of God, the Abba of all. This is summarized in the only prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, the Our Father.⁴ The sending of the community of the disciples is to be situated in the context of Jesus' own ministry.

⁴ Cf. John Dominic Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord's Prayer* (London: Harpercollins, 2011).

All this call for a retrieval of the early Church's life and service. It was in no way a threat to the existing religions. In fact, the community of the disciples of Jesus became a separate religion only sometime after the Jewish Council of Jamnia, around 90 CE. What is to be emphasized is the quality of Christian life, a life of love and compassion, which can make others exclaim with wonder see how the Christians love one another and what makes them to do so! Christian lifestyle becomes a question mark leaving an impact on others. A Roman theologian of the time and a Church Father, Tertullian, refers to the Roman perception of the Christian community: "Look," they say, "how they love one another!"⁵

The Christian community has to return to the original mindset, leaving out the discourse of "mission" and its justification. Rather than missiologists and mission scholars, we need scripture scholars who study the Scripture, not primarily for teaching and writing about the Scripture, but to live it integrally today, attracting many more to that lifestyle. Christians will have to become 'letters of Jesus Christ' for all to read!

In Practice

The Christian narrative, stories that we come across in the New Testament, must come alive and active through the service of the followers of Jesus Christ, without being troubled over the destiny of the followers of other religions. Instead, there can be collaboration with them to realize the divine reign in the contemporary times. Interreligious dialogue has to be a defining element of contemporary Christian service. Today, every Christian, more so the evangelist, must become the 'implied author' of the Gospel narrative for the contemporary society, by living it and proclaiming it relevantly so that he/she will serve as the salt, light and leaven to the society (Mt 5:13-15), and as members of a minority community (Lk 12:32), as was the case before the Constantinian era.

The contemporary Christian asks: what role

⁵ Tertullian, *Apologia*, 39.7.

did the cultural, economic or religious context play for the earliest communities? This can serve as an example and an inspiration for the Christian community today for its life and service, rather than discussing how to justify inculturation, dialogue or liberation. This enables the community to be a dynamic presence from within every context, with a sense of identification and contestation. This would be very much similar to the existence of the St. Thomas Christian community in Kerala, before the arrival of the Portuguese, a presence from within, without being swallowed up by other religions as it happened to the early Christian communities of North Africa or swallowing up other religions as did the Christian communities in Europe!⁶

The Christian presence, while permeated with the spirit of dialogue and collaboration, does not abandon its service of prophetic critique of the society, especially when the rights of human persons are trampled upon. The gospels tell the world how Jesus was never compromising with regard to the dignity of the human person. Truly, a major portion of his ministry was the defence and promotion of the dignity of the humans, especially of the little ones, for Jesus was ever aware how “in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven” (Mt 18:10).

A vital expression of the Church’s contribution to the creation of an inclusive community is the changing faces of femininity in India, trying to establish its identity in the social, economic, cultural, political, and religious spheres. It is not a question of usurping power or place occupied by men, but women taking their right place as equals in the spirit of participation. The Church, following the spirit of Jesus who not only learned from a woman (Mk 7:24- 29), but was also anointed by a woman for his passion, death and resurrection (Jn 12:3-7), must take pro-active steps for an inclusive community of men and women in the life and

ministry of the Church.

Another area of the Church becoming an inclusive community and thereby serving the Indian community as the leaven is the Church’s attitude to caste discrimination, in the Church’s own identity and ministry. At every level of its existence this has to be positively reflected, especially in the choice of persons for leadership roles within the Church, anywhere in India. Such bold and generous steps will enhance the Church’s credibility to serve as the leaven of the Kingdom in the Indian society.

The prophetic character of the disciples of Jesus in India, will resist any expression of injustice in the Indian society, more so the denial of the basic human rights of any person. This is a fundamental expression of their service to their fellow men and women, more so the poor and the powerless, enabling them to regain their human rights and to live with dignity and in freedom.

In the same spirit, any dispute or matters of lifestyle and rite within the Church has to be seen and solved primarily from the perspective of the Church’s service to the Indian society, as the light of the Kingdom. When there is so much struggle and competition for power, possession and prestige in the society at large, the Church must make every effort, that every Christian, especially the priests, religious and bishops consciously avoid the temptation, following the example of the Lord in facing his messianic temptations of power, possession and prestige (Mt 4:1-11; Lk 4: 1-13).

The suggestion to abolish the term ‘mission’ and the accompanying theology by no means implies the abandoning of the call to share with others the experience of the kingdom in Jesus, or to attract others to the community to continue that work. However, this is done mainly through a life of love, for “by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35). The very Incarnation, the central event of Christian experience, itself is the fruition of divine love: “because God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).

⁶ There may not be a consensus regarding the extent of impact St. Thomas Christian community had on others.

His ministry was a manifestation of God's love for the world, for he came to manifest the Father as a human person (Jn 1:18; 12:45; 14:9).

Continuing that work of manifesting the Father and Father's love made present in Jesus Christ for the world is the service for which the community of his disciples are sent into the world. In Jesus Christ one experiences what God is like: God's love and compassion, God's forgiveness, God's acceptance of humans, more so of the marginalized ones. Jesus' upholding of the dignity of the human person, rather than the religious laws of purity and rituals, earned him the odium of the religious leaders of his time, who in collusion with the political power killed him, but God raised him and made him the Messiah, the Christ (cf. Mk 3:6; Act2:22-36).

It is a work of attraction, rather than an aggressive expansion. It leaves a deep impact on others. In contrast to the prejudiced assessment of the western mission theoreticians that Christian work in India has been a failure (due to the insignificant percentage of Christians in India), the Christian presence has indeed positively impacted Indian culture in different ways. Just to give an example, in the past, when a natural calamity like an earthquake, a plague, or flood occurred, it was the Christian community that came forward to help out the victims while the Indian society generally attributed it to 'karma' and did little about it. Today, on the contrary, in such instances, others are there to help the victims, even if it may be mixed with other motives, even before the Christians can reach.

Such an evangelical service is in keeping with the Asian value of harmony and complementarity. Christians can also learn many things from their neighbours of other faiths, even as Jesus was enriched by the words of the Syrophoenician woman (cf. Mk 7:24-29). Such an evangelical sharing and building bridges across religions can earn for us the good will of others, which is essential for ushering in the divine reign in today's world that no religion can accomplish all by

itself.

Conclusion

We are living in an era of seismic changes affecting every aspect of life. This calls for radically reimagining Church's service to the world, always keeping with the Scripture and the practice of the early Church, even if it may imply leaving aside certain expressions and justifications developed in the course of history, and which are irrelevant for the contemporary times. This can enable the Church to be faithful to its call to be a transforming presence in every culture, calling for the involvement of every Christian for the realization of the divine reign as spelt out in the introductory sentence of Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution of the Church, *Gadium et Spes*:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts (GS 1).

All this is beautifully capsuled in the very title of the latest encyclical of Pope Francis: *Fratelli Tutti*: All are brothers and sisters!

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Ce n'est plus dans les périphéries

Mission avec les victimes de violences

La violence due à l'organisation sociale, telle que nous SMA l'avons vécue dans le nord du Nigeria et en Afrique de l'Est, n'est plus un événement ponctuel ; elle n'est pas davantage située seulement aux périphéries de la réalité africaine d'aujourd'hui. Elle est souvent au cœur du ministère dans lequel nous sommes appelés à nous engager au nom de Jésus et par notre charisme.

Les témoignages que nous entendons de toutes parts sont interpellant. Ils sont parfois difficiles à écouter et à assimiler. L'est plus encore, notre propre expérience de la violence sur le terrain ! À un certain niveau, nous sommes confrontés à des questions pratiques - que devrions-nous dire ? Que pouvons-nous faire ? Comment puis-je être présent ? Où puis-je trouver la force intérieure pour travailler avec les victimes de violences dues à l'organisation sociale ? Quels changements, à long terme, l'exposition à ces situations de stress intense entraînera-t-elle en moi ? A un niveau plus abstrait, on se demande : qu'est-ce qui peut expliquer la volonté des êtres humains de cibler sans discernement d'autres groupes ethniques ? D'après notre expérience en matière d'assistance, nous savons que la violence fait des ravages aussi bien sur l'agresseur que sur la victime. En dépit de ce que nous avons vu, nous nous demandons si les auteurs ont laissé leur humanité derrière eux ? Que s'est-il passé ?

Cet article est une tentative visant à surmonter la violence que nous voyons, prendre conscience de nos propres manquements et proposer les changements que ces situations provoquent en nous.

Ma propre expérience au Nigeria

Voici une illustration qui pourrait vous rappeler une expérience pastorale que vous avez pu avoir. Il faisait nuit et je dormais. Vers trois heures du matin, mon portable sonne. La personne au bout du fil était un paroissien. Vu l'heure, je m'apprêtais à recevoir de mauvaises nouvelles, et j'avais raison. Le message était simple : « Nous avons été attaqués dans notre village et sept hommes sont morts, c'est terrible ! » Silence ! Puis il poursuit : « J'appelle juste pour vous le faire savoir, je sais que vous ne pouvez pas venir maintenant. Si Dieu nous le permet, nous nous reverrons demain matin. » Un petit échange de mots puis nous avons terminé avec notre habituel au revoir nocturne : « Que Dieu nous garde jusqu'au matin. »

Comme vous pouvez l'imaginer, après cela je n'ai pas pu dormir, et à l'aube, nous étions tous réunis dans le village où les tueries avaient eu lieu. En entrant dans le village, j'ai rencontré des enfants, dont certains n'avaient que cinq ans. Ils portaient des petites pierres dans leurs mains et j'ai compris pourquoi. Ils étaient prêts à se défendre. Mais que pouvaient faire ces petites mains et ces pierres ? Je me demandais où ils avaient été toute cette nuit. Je me sentais aussi désespéré que ces petits enfants. Habituellement, j'arrive à me retenir de pleurer à la vue des blessures causées par les machettes et les coups de feu. J'arrive à retenir mes larmes, même en voyant des cadavres couverts de sang gisant sur le sol dur, mais ce moment était différent. J'ai pleuré.

Plus tard, j'ai appris que même des bébés avaient été blessés au cours de cette horrible attaque. C'était comme si tout était couvert

de sang. J'ai vu un matelas imbibé de sang sur le sol en ciment. J'étais incapable d'absorber toutes les images de sang versé. J'ai entendu les cris des femmes et j'ai vu le désespoir dans tous les yeux. En essayant de marcher, mes pas sont devenus faibles et ma gorge s'est soudain enrouée.

Il n'y avait rien que je puisse dire, ou même penser à dire. Beaucoup d'images me passaient par la tête : les mariages et les baptêmes que nous avions célébrés dans une grande liesse, les merveilleuses chansons et danses dont nous avons profité une semaine plus tôt (certains de nos meilleurs chanteurs et danseurs avaient été les victimes), les plans que nous avions faits pour l'avenir, et beaucoup plus.

Incapable de savoir ce qui allait suivre, le frère de l'une des victimes m'a conduit vers d'autres lieux où l'attaque avait eu lieu et m'a montré quelques-unes des traces visibles. J'ai entendu une dame dire en larmes : « Et tout ce qu'on nous dit, c'est de pardonner. » Dieu merci, quelque chose m'a empêché de prononcer la moindre platitude pieuse. J'étais sous le choc et le temps s'était arrêté. Dans mon long silence, j'ai été surpris quand quelqu'un d'autre s'est adressé à moi en disant : « sois fort ! »

Avec le « sois fort ! », j'ai réalisé que nous étions embarqués tous ensemble dans cette horrible expérience. Nous avons tous mal. La vérité est que je n'ai pas eu à chercher des mots de consolations. Ma présence suffisait, et tout était dit. J'espérais juste que ce que je ressentais était vrai, que tout comme je me sentais consolé par ces mots, la foule traumatisée était également consolée par ma présence silencieuse.

L'ironie est que, celui qui m'a consolé, c'est quelqu'un qui ressentait une douleur encore plus profonde que moi. Pour vous épargner les événements traumatisants qui ont suivi, il suffit de dire que cette situation a éveillé en moi une nouvelle compréhension ; notamment, qu'il y aura toujours quelque chose à partager, même s'il ne nous reste que notre conscience et notre volonté de partager.

Vue d'ensemble

Mon expérience n'est pas unique. Le terrorisme, de tous bords et de toutes couleurs, est devenu un phénomène mondial. Il est en opposition directe avec les valeurs évangéliques. Plus précisément, la persécution des chrétiens devient rapidement omniprésente à notre époque. Ces derniers temps, dans le contexte nigérian, nous avons entendu parler de 21 tués, 26 tués, 52 tués, et ça n'en finit plus.

Une fois, dans le nord du Nigeria, 202 personnes ont été tuées et leurs maisons incendiées. Les fermes et les approvisionnements en céréales ont également été ciblés. Ce ne sont pas seulement des chiffres mais des personnes individuelles, chacune avec une histoire et un rêve. Ce sont des gens avec qui nous avons vécu, travaillé et aimé. Bien sûr, vous ne l'apprendrez pas par les nouvelles internationales. Si vous y arriviez, vous n'obtiendriez aucun détail vous racontant comment le sang a été volontairement versé par les tueurs, accompagné de mots tels que : « Laissez-les boire le sang de leur propre peuple. »

Après un autre incident, j'ai rencontré une veuve qui avait perdu cinq fils. Elle m'a demandé comment elle était censée continuer à faire confiance et à prier. Avec un grand soupir, elle a dit : « Je suis fatiguée ! » Lorsque ces choses arrivent, ceux qui restent en vie doivent pleurer, imaginer une voie à suivre et continuer à vivre. Mais comment ? On attend toujours que l'autre chaussure tombe, que la violence éclate à nouveau.

À moins que nous ne posions des questions cruciales et significatives

Qui sont les tueurs et pourquoi tuent-ils ? La réponse des analystes politiques est qu'il s'agit de Boko Haram et/ou de bergers Peul. Cela pourrait très bien être vrai ; cependant, je pense que les étiqueter, c'est vraiment les mettre de côté, les transformer en objets et laisser des questions sans réponse à propos

de leur réalité d'êtres humains. Bien que cet étiquetage puisse répondre aux besoins des analystes sociopolitiques, il ne répond pas au préalable des préoccupations des porteurs de l'Évangile. Il faut cependant dire que tuer au nom de Dieu révèle que quelque chose ne va pas, ni avec notre image de Dieu, ni avec ce que nous sommes en tant que ses créatures. Quel que soit le côté de la fracture où nous choisissons d'être, toutes nos différences sont entrelacées dans l'humanité.¹

Une considération d'ingratitude

Que pouvons-nous dire de nous-mêmes et de notre propre relation avec un Dieu qui humanise ? Dans le nord du Nigéria, il existe un certain type de haricot qui est rarement consommé, même s'il est facilement disponible. Ces haricots ont un nom particulier, *achi chiru*, littéralement traduit de la langue haoussa par : « à manger en silence ».

On se demanderait pourquoi nous devrions être encouragés à manger en silence, alors que le partage d'un repas est un événement social qui s'accompagne généralement de partage de plaisanteries et d'histoires drôles ... Eh bien, il y a une raison à cela : pour ceux qui ont donné ce nom à ces haricots, le silence empêche de se plaindre de manquer de quelque chose de mieux à manger, surtout quand on n'a pas le bon sens d'être reconnaissant d'avoir tout de même un repas. Le silence empêche quelqu'un d'être ingrat pour ce qui peut sembler être un mauvais repas, alors que d'autres remercieraient le ciel sans cesse s'ils recevaient ne serait-ce que la même nourriture. Le danger de nos attentes non satisfaites est que nous finissons par nous plaindre et devenons ainsi aveugles à ce pour quoi nous devrions être reconnaissants. On finit par pécher contre la providence de Dieu à notre égard.

¹ Un proverbe africain dit, coupez un doigt et le reste est couvert de sang. Nous ne pouvons pas réussir à blesser un autre être humain sans nous blesser nous-mêmes. Le silence des faiseurs d'opinion pertinente sur une question aussi cruciale est préoccupant et si ce n'est pas le cas, alors quoi d'autre le sera ?

Maintenant, soyons honnêtes ! Il peut y avoir, en fait, des moments où nous nous sommes plaints. Dans le passé, nous avons pensé que certaines choses avaient une grande valeur, jusqu'au moment où nous avons été confrontés aux réalités de la vie d'autres personnes en détresse, en grande impuissance ou en impuissance évidente. Ce n'est qu'alors que nous réalisons que nous n'aurions pas dû nous plaindre en premier lieu. Le fait est que nous aurions tout aussi bien pu nous passer de ce que nous pensions indispensable. Jésus nous rappelle que « ... vous aurez toujours des pauvres avec vous » (Mt 26, 11) — Pourquoi ? L'une des raisons est de nous inciter à nous contenter des faveurs que nous avons reçues et à nous rappeler qu'il y a toujours quelqu'un d'autre moins chanceux que nous.

Comme indiqué ci-dessus, l'ironie est que lorsque les difficultés poussent les gens à leur plus bas niveau, nous ne les entendons pas se plaindre ; en fait, nous sommes souvent surpris de leur endurance et de leur résilience, et nous nous demandons parfois quelle pourrait être la source de leur force, face à la rudesse de leur vie ?

On pourrait dire en passant, qu'ils ne se plaignent peut-être pas, parce qu'ils ont appris la dure vérité que leurs opinions n'ont pas d'importance dans ce monde qui est le nôtre. Leur cri est comme le cri des poissons dans l'eau. Qui pourrait en faire la différence ? Je me souviens de la fois où un homme qui voulait me dire pourquoi il était satisfait dans la vie déclarait tout en plaisantant : « Pourquoi se plaindre quand la moitié des gens ne t'écoute pas, et le reste s'en fiche de toute façon ? » Si nous prenons la peine de nous plaindre, nous finissons par être frustrés et par nous demander pourquoi nous nous sommes dérangés. Nous perdons la paix que nous recherchions. En effet, il est gratifiant d'être reconnaissant et de s'arrêter à cela. De plus, lorsque nos cœurs ont la moindre étincelle de gratitude, ils sont prêts à partager le don de la vie et de ses richesses, en particulier la foi. Un véritable partage de la foi naît de la gratitude.

Arrêtons-nous ici pour dire que la foi a des yeux qui voient l'invisible, et ceux d'entre nous qui possèdent la foi ne doivent jamais cesser de veiller à ce que les sans-voix aient la possibilité de se taire entendre de la société au sens large. C'est ce genre de pratique significative qui apporte la libération.

Partager nos ressources et partager l'Évangile

Il existe un lien entre notre sentiment de gratitude et notre volonté de partager. Les Écritures nous donnent encore et encore un modèle pour notre conduite ; la Torah est très claire sur la responsabilité que nous avons de partager nos ressources : « Quand, dans un de tes villages que le Seigneur ton Dieu te donne, un de tes frères pauvre aura quand même besoin d'un prêt, ne refuse pas de lui tendre la main. Au contraire, ouvre ta main toute grande et prête-lui ce dont il a besoin... ». (Dt 15, 7-11). Lorsque nous respectons ces paroles, nous imitons Dieu qui est le bienfaiteur par excellence.

Le Nouveau Testament fait écho à cette idée : tout ce que nous sommes et avons, nous a été donné du ciel (Jn 3, 27). Ici, nous devons accepter que le premier et le plus grand don est « notre vie ». Saint Paul, de son côté, nous encourage à rendre grâce à Dieu pour tout ce que nous avons reçu (1 Th 5, 18) et, à nous soucier humblement du bien-être des autres (Phil. 2, 3-4).

Les évangiles eux-mêmes rendent cette idée très claire. La parabole des dix lépreux (Lc 17, 11-19) nous enseigne non seulement à être reconnaissants pour tout ce que nous sommes et avons reçu, mais elle nous révèle aussi la différence fondamentale entre Dieu et les êtres humains. Dieu n'attend pas un merci. Il exprime la différence entre la façon dont Dieu donne et la façon dont nous donnons - le partage de Dieu et notre partage. Lorsque les mères, et en fait nous tous, formons les enfants aux bonnes manières et aux connaissances pratiques, comme apprécier les présents et les sacrifices des autres, nous leur rappelons : « Et que dites-

vous ? » Dès que l'enfant dit merci, on le félicite — on renforce en lui le lien entre les mots « merci » et recevoir un cadeau. Cyniquement on pourrait observer qu'à la fin, une fois conditionnés, ils diront toujours merci pour s'assurer le cadeau de demain.

Dans la parabole des dix lépreux, Jésus, conscient de l'ingratitude des « neuf autres » lépreux, leur fait quand même don de la guérison. Jésus a fait le même don à tous, les uns ont reçu avec gratitude et les autres sans gratitude, juifs comme samaritains. La générosité de Dieu ignore notre ingratitude. Notre position fondamentale de gratitude Chrétienne peut nous rapprocher de la source de toute bonté. Et à long terme, nous sommes les ultimes bénéficiaires de notre gratitude.

Apprendre à partager comme le Christ l'a fait

Pour en revenir au seul lépreux retourné pour rendre grâce et glorifier Dieu, Jésus a dit : « Lève-toi et va, ta foi t'a sauvé » (Lc 17, 19). Notre gratitude est une façon de reconnaître et d'exprimer notre foi en Dieu. La gratitude du samaritain lépreux s'accompagna du geste de se jeter aux pieds de Jésus. C'est un geste d'adoration et une forme de prière, une prière qui lui a apporté un don encore plus grand ; à savoir, le Salut.

Revenons à l'objet de cette réflexion : les victimes de la violence due à l'organisation sociale.

Nous partageons ce que nous avons et, même parfois, ce que nous n'avons pas. Que nous puissions partager ce que nous avons est facile à comprendre ; mais lorsque le sens de notre humanité commune nous appelle à partager, il nous met au défi de partager même ce que nous n'avons pas. Il peut même nous demander de partager malgré notre incapacité à voir en nous-mêmes quelque chose qui vaille la peine d'être partagé. Nous pouvons ressentir un manque de confiance dans la possibilité d'un nouveau processus de partage.

Lorsqu'il s'agit de partager les douleurs et les difficultés des autres, partager à partir de notre vide ne se fait pas facilement. Malgré tout, dans notre faiblesse et notre sentiment d'inadéquation, dans notre sentiment de vide, nous pouvons encore partager. Pour paraphraser saint Jean-Paul II, même les pauvres ont quelque chose à donner. Jésus loue le partage des indigents, car il n'épargne rien, comme le montre très bien la petite pièce de la veuve (Lc 21,1-4). Il s'agit d'un don dans lequel on s'abandonne à la providence divine plutôt que de compter sur soi-même ou sur les autres.

Lorsque ce qui doit être donné est quelque chose d'intangible, comme des mots, ce genre de don exige le don de notre présence, même si c'est une présence silencieuse. Oui, parfois des mots appropriés peuvent disparaître de nos esprits en un instant. Il arrive un moment où l'on ne trouve pas les mots justes pour reconforter un ami ou un proche qui souffre. Si nous en trouvons, ce sont peut-être de très bons mots et de bonnes intentions, mais ils peuvent s'avérer ne pas être ce dont nous avons besoin à ce moment précis. Au lieu d'apaiser, ils ne peuvent que raviver les affres de la douleur chez celui que nous souhaitons consoler. Pour cette raison, les locuteurs swahilis disent, *ajikwaaye haambiwi pole*, en français, « ne dis pas désolé à celui qui trébuche. » La signification profonde de ceci est que lorsque quelqu'un a du mal à arriver à quelque chose, des mots de sympathie peuvent désespérer cette personne. Selon les mots du pape François : Il y a des chrétiens dont la vie ressemble à un carême sans Pâques.... Des gens qui doivent endurer de grandes souffrances. Ce sont les personnes dont nous sommes appelés à partager les expériences de vie comme une manière de les servir. Ce sont « les plus abandonnés » dont parle le Vénérable Melchior de Marion Brésillac. Soulignant notre nécessaire réponse, le pape François poursuit : « ... lentement mais sûrement, nous devons tous laisser la joie de la foi revivre lentement comme une confiance tranquille mais ferme, même au milieu de la plus

grande détresse » (*Evangelii Gaudium* n 6).

Ainsi, lorsque Jésus ordonne à ses disciples : « vous avez reçu gratuitement, donnez gratuitement » (Mt 10, 8), cela implique de partager ce que nous ne savons pas, ce que nous devons encore apprendre. Nous ne venons pas comme des experts en matière de foi ou comme des génies qui ont tout appris. Nous venons en tant qu'étudiants de Christ l'enseignant, toujours étudiants. Ensemble, avec tous ceux qui cherchent à connaître Dieu, nous nous approchons de la présence de Dieu les uns avec les autres, pieds nus comme Moïse devant le buisson ardent (Ex 3, 5). Nous devons être toujours prêts à apprendre et à partager ce que nous maîtrisons déjà.

L'humanité s'enrichit lorsque nous partageons les vérités uniques que nous avons apprises et expérimentées sur Dieu dans notre diversité. Notre défi au partage ne s'arrête pas à la terreur et aux persécutions. Il va sans dire que là où il y a des persécutions, il y a aussi bien d'autres formes de souffrances humaines. Dans notre ministère, nous devons faire face à de nombreux autres problèmes sociaux, dont le chômage croissant des jeunes, une réalité qui engendre le désespoir et les nombreuses répercussions qui en découlent. Parfois, le chômage est dû à des gouvernements non fonctionnels ou corrompus, et seule une foi basée sur l'intervention divine peut inspirer de l'espoir aux personnes défavorisées dans un contexte de pauvreté abjecte et généralisée.

Parfois, nous devons faire face à un système de santé surchargé, à un manque d'équipements sociaux appropriés, à des problèmes liés à l'immigration et à l'urbanisation, à des systèmes d'éducation et de justice défaillants et à une cécité face à la dégradation de l'environnement. Il m'est impossible de détailler tous les problèmes auxquels nous sommes confrontés dans notre travail de proximité.

Je veux m'attarder un instant sur cette

dernière question, celle de l'environnement. Je pense que c'est une question dans la réalité africaine qui ne nous préoccupe pas assez. Comme nous le savons, aux yeux de saint Paul, c'est toute la création qui a soupiré dans les douleurs de l'enfantement, jusqu'à présent, en attendant la rédemption (Rm 8,22). Je le mentionne ici, car il n'y a, en fait, pas de solution rapide à l'impasse dans laquelle nous nous trouvons. Notre réponse en tant que chrétiens et particulièrement en tant que catholiques, devrait être apportée à travers le prisme de l'évangile.

Dans l'ensemble, les exigences de l'Évangile restent constantes : nous sommes appelés à partager le don de la vie et à encourager ce partage. Nous nous efforçons de rester fidèles à notre volonté de partager. Dans le cadre de notre réponse, nous devons enseigner d'importantes compétences pratiques, nécessaires à la poursuite de la vie sur cette planète et aux générations futures ; celles-ci peuvent inclure la communication, le travail d'équipe, la flexibilité, la pensée critique et la pleine conscience de qui nous sommes appelés à être, pour ne citer que ceux-là. Nous devons faire cela en sachant que le partage de nos ressources est le fondement de la justice et de la paix.

L'Évangile est toujours exigeant, car « quand la vie intérieure se ferme sur ses propres intérêts, il n'y a plus de place pour les autres, les pauvres n'entrent plus, on n'écoute plus la voix de Dieu, on ne jouit plus de la douce joie de son amour, l'enthousiasme de faire le bien ne palpite plus » (*Evangelii Gaudium* n° 2).

Faire face à l'anxiété

Malgré nos efforts pour relever les défis humains et soulager les souffrances, les appels à l'aide se multiplient. Nous les rencontrons chaque jour dans notre travail missionnaire. Travailler dans ces conditions peut créer une pression en nous et nous enlever notre joie et notre paix, et nous rendre anxieux. Cela se produit particulièrement dans les moments où nous nous sentons aussi vides et aussi impuissants que ceux que nous sommes appelés à servir.

Des chercheurs travaillant dans le domaine des sciences du comportement nous enseignent que « l'anxiété et les tensions sont des fonctions essentielles de la vie, au même titre que la faim et la soif. Ce sont nos réactions d'autoprotection lorsque nous sommes confrontés à des menaces pour notre sécurité, notre bien-être, notre bonheur ou notre estime de soi (Stevenson 1962, 384-385). Bien qu'ils fassent partie du système de défense de la vie, nous devons être conscients des dommages qu'ils peuvent causer. Les mêmes chercheurs nous avertissent d'être « vigilants lorsque nos bouleversements émotionnels deviennent plus fréquents et lorsqu'ils nous secouent sévèrement ». Lorsque l'anxiété devient chronique, elle peut nuire à notre santé et à notre vocation chrétienne. Certaines personnes parlent d'épuisement professionnel, c'est-à-dire d'effondrement physique ou mental, généralement causé par le surmenage, le stress ou un travail infructueux.

Les enseignants concernés, les médecins, les hommes et femmes d'affaires et de nombreux types de travailleurs le savent. Individuellement et en groupe, ils cherchent des remèdes dans les solutions offertes par la science moderne : planifier sa récréation ; faire une chose à la fois ; éviter l'envie de devenir un super-homme ; être objectif avec la critique ; en parler avec quelqu'un.²

En tant que croyants et ministres de l'Évangile, nous acceptons et utilisons également ces recommandations ; par exemple, nous parlons à un ami qui est tout aussi humain que nous, quelqu'un en qui nous avons confiance pour nous écouter et nous aider, mais plus important encore, nous parlons à Jésus, qui nous appelle aussi amis (Jn 15,15).

² S. G. Stevenson, « The Magical Ways to Inner Peace, How to Deal with Your Tensions », in *Our Human Body, Its Wonders & Its Care*. New York 1962, 384.

Mots de clôture

C'est en partageant et en conversant avec notre Divin Ami dans la prière que nous pouvons trouver pertinent le texte suivant de Mgr Oscar Romero :

Il est utile, de temps en temps, de prendre du recul et d'avoir une vision à long terme. Le royaume n'est pas seulement au-delà de nos efforts, il est même au-delà de notre vision. Nous n'accomplissons de notre vivant qu'une infime partie de la magnifique entreprise qu'est l'œuvre de Dieu. Rien de ce que nous faisons n'est complet, ce qui est une façon de dire que le royaume se trouve toujours au-delà de nous.

Aucune déclaration ne dit tout ce qui pourrait être dit.

Aucune prière n'exprime pleinement notre foi.

Aucune confession n'apporte la perfection.
Aucune visite pastorale n'apporte la plénitude.

Aucun programme n'accomplit la mission de l'Église.

Aucun ensemble de buts et d'objectifs ne comprend tout. C'est de cela que nous parlons.

Nous plantons les graines qui pousseront un jour.

Nous arrosons les graines qui sont déjà plantées, sachant qu'elles sont porteuses d'avenir.

Nous posons des fondations qui devront encore être développées.

Nous fournissons une levure qui produit bien au-delà de nos capacités.

Nous ne pouvons pas tout faire, et il y a un sentiment de libération à s'en rendre compte. Cela nous permet de faire quelque chose, et de le faire très bien.

C'est peut-être incomplet, mais c'est un début, une étape sur le chemin, une opportunité pour que la grâce du Seigneur entre et fasse le reste.

Nous ne verrons peut-être jamais les résultats finaux, mais c'est là la différence entre le maître d'œuvre et l'ouvrier.

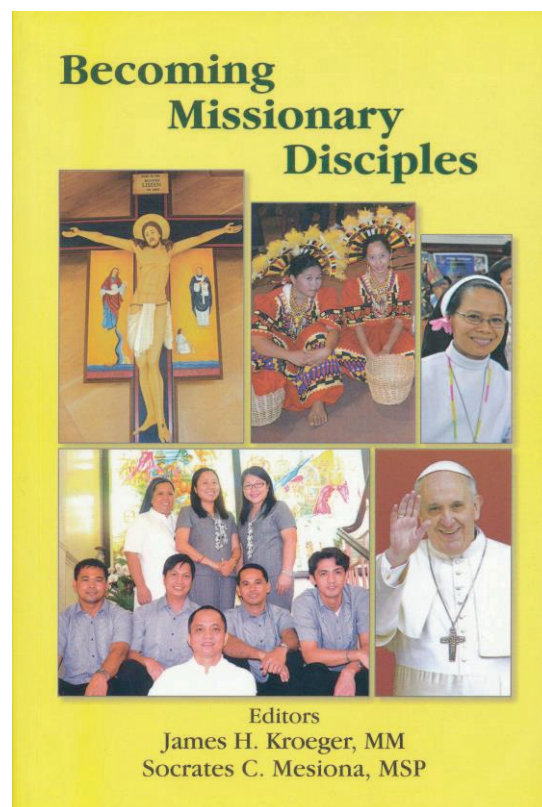
Nous sommes des ouvriers, pas des maîtres bâtisseurs ; des ministres, pas des messies. Nous sommes les prophètes d'un avenir qui n'est pas le nôtre.

L'artiste de la Renaissance Léonard de Vinci avait raison de dire : « une œuvre d'art n'est jamais achevée ; elle est seulement abandonnée. Abandonnée, dans le sens où elle est laissée ouverte pour être poursuivie. Nous sommes des collaborateurs dans le grand projet de Dieu, un projet plus grand que nous. Nous sommes ici pour faire notre part, de notre mieux. C'est Dieu qui mène cette œuvre à sa bonne fin. »

(**Ref:** *Mission comme Passerelle*, No.154, 2022, pp.77 – 87)).

(An English translation of this article will be available soon on SEDOS Website).

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SEDOS AUTUMN SEMINAR ON 28TH OCTOBER 2022

At Collegio Verbo Divino, Via dei Verbiti 1, Roma

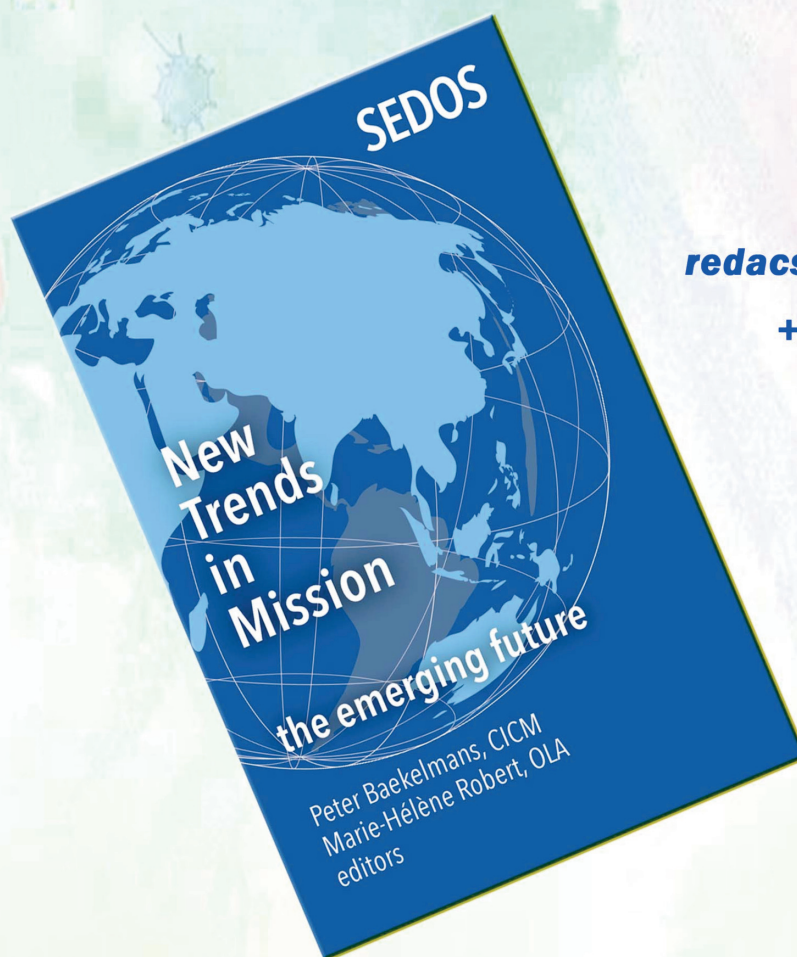
PROGRAM

Friday, 28 October 2022

9.30	Registration
10.00	Prayer Introduction and Welcome by the President
10.15 - 11.15	Address and Launch of the Book, 'New Trends in Mission' by Cardinal Tagle or a Representative from the Dicastery.
Few words by Fr. Peter Baekelmans, CICM (on-line)	
11.15 - 11.30	Coffee/Tea break
11.30 - 12.30	Talk on theme - <i>'Revisiting the Charisms In Today's Context'</i> By Fr. Alain, CSSp, Superior General
13.00 - 15.00	Lunch (Lunch break in the vicinity)
15.00 - 16.00	Panel Discussion on theme - <i>'Strategy on Mission in the Light of Ongoing Chapters'</i> 1 Sr. Ruth Pilar Mara, CGFMA 2. Fr. Stanley Lubungo, M.Afr, Superior General 3. Fr. Michele Perniola, CFIC, Postulator General of Passionists 4. Fr. C. Massimo Parisi, CP
16.00 - 16.45	Discussion and Conclusion.
16.45	Coffee/Tea break



**Are you looking for a broader knowledge on
New Trends in Mission?
The source of emerging future is available for you....**



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*The content of the book is drawn from
the 2021 Mission Symposium of SEDOS in Rome.*

New Trends in Mission: The Emerging Future offers a comprehensive overview of new trends in Catholic mission. Scholars from across the globe explore key issues including the role of missionary religious institutes; the missionary vision of Pope Francis; mission with migrants and refugees; proclamation; secularization; interfaith dialogue; interculturality; laity in mission and many more.