



Mission: To proclaim Joy to the World

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SEDOS

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SEDOS BULLETIN 2022

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Printing: Tipografia DON BOSCO

*SEDOS Bulletin is a bi-monthly publication, and is free of charge for SEDOS Members (max. 3).
The yearly subscription is: €30 in Europe, €45 outside Europe.
For further information, advice, or change in subscription,
please write to: redacsed@sedosmission.org*

The digital version of the articles, and an English translation of all the other articles,
can be found on the SEDOS website: www.sedosmission.org .

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Editorial



Dear Members and Readers,

The message of Christmas is to share joy with one another and very specially with those who are wounded and suffering due to natural disasters, war, violence, sexual abuse, poverty, exploitation and discrimination of various kinds. The Birth of Jesus brings hope to all those who are depressed and oppressed, love to all who are lonely and abandoned and peace to all who have lost hope. It is possible to hope for a new world where there will be no more division and discrimination based on caste, culture, gender or religion, where all will be united in love cherishing one another's differences with joy. It is God's wish that "All may be one." It is unity within difference and not a unity of uniformity or universalism.

The articles in this Bulletin connect us by on Sharing and Proclaiming our joy with profound hope. And that is exactly what Christmas is all about.

The first article by **James H. Kroeger**, MM, deals with *Evangelii Gaudium* where Pope Francis invites the Church to read the ever-changing signs of the times. He is clearly aware that "today's vast and rapid cultural changes demand that we constantly seek ways of expressing unchanging truths in a language which brings out their abiding newness" (n. 41). According to the author, the success of the mission and evangelization requires "renewed evangelizers and joy which is the most infallible sign of the presence of God." Joy is convincing; joy evangelizes. Pope Francis invites all, "to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy". Being transformed by the joy of salvation, the author invites everyone to

become a joyful herald of missionary evangelization!

In the second article, "Intercultural Context and Mission", **Peter Baekelmans**, CICM explains that there is a difference between "multi-national living" and "inter-national living"! It is not because different nationalities live together under one roof that we are automatically in dialogue on a cultural level. Pope Francis complains that most of the colleges in Rome are more like hotels than real religious communities. Interculturality involves "interaction" among the different cultures in a community. Building international communities has become a way of doing mission. But it is only when we show how to live together as one family in an intercultural way that we can set a good example. He further reminds us that *Christian culture goes beyond all nationalities*. For us intercultural living is to give priority to the poor, not to try to be the first seated, not to seek to be rich and famous but to share what we have and to listen to God and obey our superiors. He also talks about the need to "exit learning" and "enter learning" in the intercultural *mission context*. It is not enough to learn about the culture of the mission country, we also have to leave our own culture behind. Fr. Peter emphasises that in the interreligious context, dialogue is necessary but this dialogue must be one of consideration and religious behaviour.

Joseph Scaria Palakeel, MST, in his article, "Identities and Universalisms in the Missionary Context of India", talks about Indian Christians who are ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and ritually diverse, are proud to be Christian. In the multi-religious context of India, there is reciprocal respect for the other person's religion and culture. But there is an attempt to spread a new concept of *universalism that is affecting India*. Adherents of this

universalism are trying to suppress other minority groups in India. They dream of turning India into a 'Hindu Rashtra' (nationalism) with the ideal of 'one nation, one culture, one religion', where every citizen adopts the Hindu way of life under a new Constitution. This universalism is a threat. Pope Francis cautions that "an authoritarian and abstract universalism" which seeks to eliminate all differences and tradition in "a superficial quest for unity" and a "one-dimensional uniformity" is false. "This false universalism ends up depriving the world of its various colours, its beauty and, ultimately, its humanity.... The human family needs to learn to live together in harmony and peace, without all of us having to be the same." True universalism is actually oneness, unity in diversity.

In the last article, "Mission in the African Church: In the Light of Sexual Abuse and the COVID-19 Pandemic", **Stanislaus T. Lazar**, SVD, speaks about the context of sexual abuse and the struggle of society. He says that during the pandemic, there have been more cases of sexual abuse and the harassment of women. Racial abuse and maltreatment of children were higher. He reminds us of our prophetic mission.

He says that the abuse committed by the Church hierarchy or any person should not deter us from following our Master and to observe our vows prophetically. Our mission is to heal the suffering, seek justice, prevent future abuse and restore trust and credibility within the ecclesial community. Our mission is to be vigilant, compassionate and prophetic. Our mission is to bring hope and joy to those who suffered and are still suffering.

I am sure these articles will serve to enlighten your mission both individually and collectively. We have included **Chris Chaplin**, MSC's, Christmas Message that he prepared for the SEDOS Christmas gathering at the *Collegio dei Verbiti*, the Annual Report of SEDOS and the parting words of our former President, **Tesfaye Tadesse**, MCCJ.

I take this opportunity to wish all the Members of SEDOS a joyful and grace-filled Christmas and a prosperous New Year 2023.

John Paul Herman, SVD

Director of SEDOS



Photo from the SEDOS Christmas Party

James H. Kroeger, MM

Attentive to God's Signs

Evangelii Gaudium and Mission Today

The Joy of the Gospel, Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation, was issued on the Feast of Christ the King in 2013. In this lengthy document (51,000 words), Francis, quoting Paul VI, exhorts all communities to an "ever watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times" (51). He also speaks of our attempt "to read the signs of the times" (108) and to be "attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit who helps us read the signs of the times" (14). Francis situates his reflections within the framework of the imperative to discern God's signs.

This task of examining current realities in the light of Christian faith is "a grave responsibility" (51). Francis proposes using "an evangelical discernment" which is "the approach of a missionary disciple" who is guided by "the light and strength of the Holy Spirit" (50). Christian faith does demand "recognizing and discerning spirits" and ultimately "choosing movements of the spirit of good and rejecting those of the spirit of evil" (51). This presentation seeks to examine how Francis can be seen to be employing a type of "signs of the times" methodology in *Evangelii Gaudium*. We are challenged to inquire how this inductive approach can assist us in exploring the Church's mission today.

A Vatican II Pope. Francis is the first pope in many decades who was not actually present during the deliberations of Vatican II. Remarkably, five popes did take an active role in the Council: John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI. However, as manifested in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis is clearly imbued with Council perspectives. He quotes from several Council documents, asserting that "it is important to draw out the pastoral

consequences of the Council's teaching" (38).

In two places (41, 84), Francis directly quotes the words of John XXIII's opening address to the Council, recalling at length John XXIII's clear disagreement with the "prophets of doom" (84). Francis also notes that "fifty years after the Second Vatican Council," the Church does not adopt a "naïve optimism," but this "must not mean that we are any less trusting in the Spirit or less generous" (84).

Francis frequently uses texts from Pope Paul VI. He twice quotes *Ecclesiam Suam*, Paul VI's first encyclical, written in 1964 during the Council (26, 51). One finds at least a dozen quotes from *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (e.g., 10, 12, 146 [2x], 150, 151, 154 [3x], 156, 158, 176, 181). In the first two quotes of *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis directly cites Paul IV's 1975 apostolic exhortation *Gaudete in Domino*, a document that obviously influenced the writing of *Evangelii Gaudium*. Furthermore, even without presenting a full documentation of the writings of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, one recognizes that Francis is remarkably conversant with the popes, documents, and theological themes of Vatican II.

Historical Background of "Signs of the Times." The Second Vatican Council was convoked by Pope John XXIII in the apostolic constitution *Humanae Salutis*, dated December 25, 1961. In this document Pope John XXIII first used the expression "signs of the times"; here one finds the beginnings of a new direction in theological methodology. John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* has a section concluding every chapter which is entitled (by its

editors) the “Signs of the Times.” In this his last encyclical, John XXIII enumerates three major signs as important characteristics of our age: the evolving roles of (1) laborers, (2) women, and (3) the “new” nations that were formerly colonies.

Undoubtedly, the impetus given by John XXIII to this inductive method of theologizing on life’s events and empirical reality is clearly one of his innovations. As a result, this methodology sees the “signs of the times” as a valid *locus theologicus*, though methodological precision must be provided on its use within contemporary theology.

This method is found at the basis of some Council documents; the best-known passage is from *Gaudium et Spes*: “The Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (4). Priests are to cooperate closely with the laity “so that together with them they will be able to recognize the signs of the times” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* 9). The laity should promote solidarity among all people as one of the keys “signs of our times” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem* 14). The Council encourages “all the Catholic faithful to recognize the signs of the times and take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism” (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 4). Some other passages where an understanding of God’s work in human history is manifested are: *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 43 and *Gaudium et Spes* 11, 42, and 44.

The Second Vatican Council created (in 1964) a special sub-commission [*de signis temporum*] to assist it with a descriptive definition and explanation of what was meant by the signs of the times. In the great signs of the times, which are present within the entire human community, one may discern the visible presence and action of God. One perceives God’s action directing humanity toward the fulfillment of His designs. Thus, in these great movements and aspirations—even in great secular movements that occur in history—one can discern God’s purposes being made manifest to humanity.

An insightful discourse on the signs of the times is found in the address of Paul VI at his general audience on April 16, 1969; here the pope provides abundant clarity of direction on the proper use of the signs of the times as a theological methodology. He notes that the expression itself has taken on “a current use and a deep, very wide and interesting meaning”; it is “the theological interpretation of contemporary history.” Pope Francis would certainly resonate with Paul VI’s insights on how a genuine discernment of current events is necessarily associated with the Church’s evangelizing mission in the contemporary world.

Terms and Method. The *biblical* expression “signs of the times” (Mt 16:2-4) originates in Jesus’ reference to the messianic signs present in his life; he invites the Jews to open their perception to these signs and see the fulfillment of God’s prophecy to his people regarding the coming of the Messiah. The *theological* meaning of the signs of the times is somewhat different; thus, respecting exegetical accuracy, the scriptural reference quoted above does not appear in the official text of *Gaudium et Spes* 4. In addition, Pope Paul VI, speaking of the “Signs of the Times” [April 16, 1969], notes that the expression only has “a remote evangelical reminiscence.” All these clarifications, while providing precision, in no way jeopardize the valid theological use of the signs of the times as a *locus theologicus*.

To achieve the objective of interpreting contemporary history theologically demands methodological precision in using the theology of the signs of the times. What then is the correct procedure to follow in this form of theologizing (an approach that will be helpful in understanding *Evangelii Gaudium*)?

According to the Vatican II sub commission dealing with the proper understanding of this approach, the signs of the times must be seen as operating on a double plane: the *sociological* level and the *theological* level. Within the sociological level itself a dual reality is present.

Firstly, on the sociological level, the signs of the times emerge from the great changes in science and technology, in transport and communications, in medicine, in computerization, etc. Society becomes more complexly organized; the world becomes economically interdependent; humanity finds itself living in a “global village”; history seems to be speeded up. These are simply some of the great changes taking place in the modern world. This lining up of the “sheer facts” is the first dimension of the *socio-historical* level.

The second aspect of this level is an investigation of these changes by using the behavioral and social sciences. This is done in terms of *what effects and what human impact* all these developments have on human consciousness and on social life. How does such rapid and all-pervasive change affect human minds, human hearts, human life? What effects result from such change—the impact on human awareness, on human knowledge, on human sensibility, on human aspirations and desires, and so on?

Clarifications. The signs of the times are NOT the mere facts alone; the facts are, as it were, only the *materia ex qua*, the matter from which the signs of the times arise; thus, the “signs” are more properly the human desires and questions that arise because of the avalanche of change. In short, as noted earlier, what is the “human impact” of the events in humanity’s total environment? As Paul VI noted, the world becomes a book for us. Thus, the Church must give a close reading of this book to see how all humanity has been affected—and what implications are present for her mission of evangelization.

Sociological thematization is essential to this methodological approach; yet, it is incomplete by itself. Paul VI, in describing the “method to follow,” remarks: “We willingly admit that sociology is a science of great merit in itself and for the purpose that interests us, that is, the search for a higher and indicative meaning of the facts themselves. But sociology cannot be an

independent moral criterion, nor can it replace theology.”

Thus, the method necessarily moves to the *theological* level. *Gaudium et Spes* 4 insists that the Church’s task is to *scrutinize* the signs of the times (*sociological* level) and to *interpret* them in the light of the Gospel (*theological* level). Empirical and historical thematizations of reality must be discerned in the light of Christian faith and Gospel values.

This discernment on the theological plane is accomplished by a reflection on the direction in which these signs are pointing. Are they leading human history to be a fulfillment of God’s plans for humanity? Are they (in Paul VI’s words) events which “spontaneously meet higher plans, which we know to be Christian and divine (such as the pursuit of unity, of peace, of justice)”? Do they suggest “a simultaneous step forward of the Kingdom of God in the human kingdom? Are they a clear manifestation that (as Pope John XXIII spoke of in his *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* opening speech at Vatican II and which Pope Francis also quotes in *Evangelii Gaudium* 84) “divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by human effort and even beyond all expectations, are directed to the fulfillment of God’s superior and inscrutable designs, in which everything, even human setbacks, leads to the greater good of the Church”? Clearly, this is the *theological* level where the reflection of faith enters to see just precisely how these developments are furthering or hindering the designs of God.

This “theology of the signs of the times” obviously is not a methodology independent of the ecclesial community. Paul VI acknowledges the role of all Christians and the reality of the *sensus fidei* (see also *Evangelii Gaudium* 119, 198). However, Paul VI also asserts that “the assistance of the hierarchical magisterium will always be provident and decisive,” especially when “the ambiguity of the interpretation deserves to be solved either in the certainty of truth or to the benefit of the common good.” Indeed, the necessity of the Church’s role arises from

the fact that this approach deals with “signs,” and signs by their nature need interpretation. The Church is the privileged place for the discernment of the signs of the times, because the Spirit is present within her, leading her to the fullness of truth (cf. Jn. 16:13).

Schematic Presentation of the “Signs” Theological Approach. At this juncture in the presentation, readers may find it helpful to view the “signs” theological method in the form of a simple schema. The pivotal “signs” quote from *Gaudium et Spes* 4 will be integrated into this overview. In outline form, here is a presentation of the “Signs of the Times” Theological Method.

First, on the **Sociological-Historical** level (**A**) one must: (1) *investigate* empirical reality (data and its context) and then (2) *thematize* empirical reality (the “human impact” of this reality or environment). Secondly, on the **Pastoral-Theological-Missiological** level one must: (**B**) offer a “faith-evaluation” of the “signs” which necessarily incorporates the following: (1) Word of God/Scripture; (2) Christian faith and Tradition; (3) *Sensus fidei* of the believing community; (4) Specific guidance of the hierarchical magisterium; (5) Reality of sin (personal and social) within the world; (6) Centrality of the person of Christ; and, (7) Role of the Holy Spirit. **Note:** This first task (**A**) is seen as a “scrutiny of the signs of the times”; the second task (**B**) is the “interpretation in the light of the Gospel” (cf. GS 4).

This brief schematic overview can serve as a kind of concluding synthesis to the theory and theological bases of the “signs of the times method” whereby the Church seeks to be deeply engaged with the realities of the contemporary world for a more effective preaching of the Gospel. In light of these helpful clarifications on the “signs” inductive approach to theological reflection, the presentation now moves more directly back to Pope Francis and *Evangelii Gaudium*.

Francis’ View of the Church’s Task. In several places in *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis expresses his insights on the imperatives facing the Church as it practices an “ever watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times” (51). He admits that the Church would not be “well served by a purely sociological analysis which would aim to embrace all of reality” (50) and that it is “not the task of the Pope to offer a detailed and complete analysis of contemporary reality” (51). Yet, this does not mitigate against the “grave responsibility” (51) of the Church to be deeply engaged in understanding and serving contemporary society and humanity. What Francis envisions is a genuine “evangelical discernment” which is “the approach of a missionary disciple” (50). “We need to distinguish clearly what might be a fruit of the kingdom from what runs counter to God’s plan. This involves not only recognizing and discerning spirits, but also—and this is decisive—choosing movements of the spirit of good and rejecting those of the spirit of evil” (51). In this discernment process Francis notes: “I take for granted the different analyses which other documents of the universal magisterium have offered, as well as those proposed by the regional and national conferences of bishops” (51). Francis favorably cites numerous insights from conferences of bishops around the world (e.g., Latin America and Caribbean, USA, France, Congo, Oceania, India, Brazil, Philippines, etc.). In this way, Francis is employing a world-wide perspective in his discerning of the signs of the times; he humbly admits: “It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory” (16). “It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country” (184), to effectively read the signs for their own location and local Church.

Further Insights. The Pope is clearly aware of “today’s vast and rapid cultural changes that demand we constantly seek ways of expressing unchanging truths in a language

which brings out their abiding newness” (41). And here, once again, Pope Francis quotes the opening speech of John XXIII to the Second Vatican Council: “The deposit of faith is one thing ... the way it is expressed is another” (41). Francis goes on to assert that in “her ongoing discernment” of current signs and trends, the Church will realize that some customs and practices “may be beautiful, but they no longer serve as means of communicating the Gospel. We should not be afraid to re-examine them” (43). Again, a commitment to discerning the signs of the times will help the Church realize that she “has rules or precepts which may have been quite effective in their time, but no longer have the same usefulness for directing and shaping people’s lives” (43).

The open vision and perspective of Pope Francis to discern concrete events of history and their impact on people leads him to many helpful insights. “When properly understood, cultural diversity is not a threat to Church unity” (117); in fact, “the faith and life of the Church [can] be expressed in legitimate forms appropriate for each culture” (118). Francis appreciates “the challenge of an inculturated preaching” (143) for an effective communication of the Gospel. Such “signs-sensitive” preaching actually becomes “an exercise in evangelical discernment” (154).

Francis’ vision of linking the concrete reality of people’s lives with Gospel values is manifested in one of his lengthy quotes from Pope Paul VI: “We know that ‘evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the increasing interplay of the Gospel and of man’s concrete life, both social and personal’” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 181); see *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 29. Francis then takes this perspective and applies it to the human family “with all its tragedies and struggles, its hopes and aspirations, its strengths and weaknesses” (183).

In a later section, Francis notes: “I intend to concentrate on two great issues which strike me as fundamental at this time in history. I will treat them more fully, because I believe that they will shape the future of humanity.

These issues are: first, the inclusion of the poor in society, and second, peace and social dialogue” (185). To address these signs, Francis enunciates four principles which he believes are foundational for “building a people in peace, justice and fraternity” (221-237).

The foregoing citations from *Evangelii Gaudium* are, in the opinion of this author, an affirmation that Pope Francis is deeply involved in a “faith-reading” of the signs of the times (though his actual use of the “signs of the times” terminology only appears three times in his text: 14, 51, 108). Francis is humble in his pastoral approach; “the Church does not have solutions for every particular issue” (241). He states his objective: “Starting from certain social issues of great importance for the future of humanity, I have tried to make explicit once again the inescapable social dimension of the Gospel message and to encourage all Christians to demonstrate it by their words, attitudes and deeds” (258). Francis invites all Christians to engage the ever-changing world as “Spirit-filled evangelizers” who are “full of fervor, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction” (261).

A Brief List of Signs. As one navigates *Evangelii Gaudium*, the great panorama of subjects that Pope Francis treats emerges. More than just a catalogue of topics, these many areas may be considered “signs” which the Church must attentively address as she embarks upon “a new chapter of evangelization” (1). Permit a brief sampling of some areas noted by Francis: “health care, education and communications” (52), “a ‘throw away’ culture” (53), “an impersonal economy” (55), “widespread corruption and self-serving tax evasion” (56), “inordinate consumption” (60), “attacks on religious freedom” (61), “human trafficking, the narcotics trade, the abuse and exploitation of minors, the abandonment of the elderly and the infirm” (75), “heightened individualism” (78), and many more.

Francis is not overwhelmed by current realities. He asserts: “The evils of our

world—and those of the Church—must not be excuses for diminishing our commitment and our fervor. Let us look upon them as challenges which can help us to grow” (84). “Challenges exist to be overcome! Let us be realists, but without losing our joy, our boldness and our hope-filled commitment” (109).

Time and again, *Evangelii Gaudium* provides a profound faith-perspective which assists Christians in their reading of the “signs” and in living their commitment as missionary disciples. Francis boldly states: “In our time humanity is experiencing a turning-point in its history” (52). “Seeing reality with the eyes of faith, we cannot fail to acknowledge what the Holy Spirit is sowing” (68).

The Church is to recognize that “the changes taking place in these great spaces and the culture which they create are a privileged locus of the new evangelization” (73). “What is called for is an evangelization capable of shedding light on these new ways of relating to God, to others and to the world around us, and inspiring essential values” (74). The “new world” in which we live means that Christians must “realize that a uniform and rigid program of evangelization is not suited to this complex reality” (75).

Challenges not only exist in the external world; they are also present within the Church. Francis notes: “one can observe in many agents of evangelization, even though they pray, a heightened individualism, a crisis of identity, and a cooling of fervor. These are three evils which fuel one another” (78). “They end up stifling the joy of mission” (79). “It pains me greatly to discover how some Christian communities, and even consecrated persons, can tolerate different forms of enmity, division, calumny, defamation, vendetta, jealousy.... Whom are we going to evangelize if this is the way we act?” (100).

Creative Responses to Challenging Signs.

To assist Christians in addressing profound challenges both within and outside the Church, Francis presents an innovative list of eight “no” statements and seven “yes”

exhortations. First, employing a kind of *via negativa*, Francis alerts us to factors that could diminish the Church’s effectivity in the world today. He bluntly says: “No to an economy of exclusion” (53-54); “No to the new idolatry of money” (55-56); “No to a financial system which rules rather than serves” (57-58); “No to the inequality which spawns violence” (59-60); “No to selfishness and spiritual sloth” (81-83); “No to sterile pessimism” (84-86); “No to spiritual worldliness” (93-97); and, “No to warring among ourselves” (98-101).

Francis also exhorts us to be vigilant and not to let ourselves be “robbed” of pivotal dimensions of the Christian life: “Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary enthusiasm!” (80); “Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the joy of evangelization!” (83); “Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of hope!” (86); “Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of community!” (92); “Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the Gospel!” (97); “Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the ideal of fraternal love!” (101); and, “Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary vigor!” (109).

These “no” statements and “yes” exhortations clearly show that Pope Francis is neither naïve nor unrealistic in his efforts to promote evangelization within the Church. He is simply reflecting the realism needed to read the “signs” for a more effective missionary evangelization. He affirms that “in spite of everything, Saint Paul’s exhortation is directed to each of us: ‘Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good’ (Rom 12:21). And again: ‘Let us not grow weary in doing what is right’ (Gal 6:9)” (101).

Joy, Pivotal Sign of Missionary Disciples.

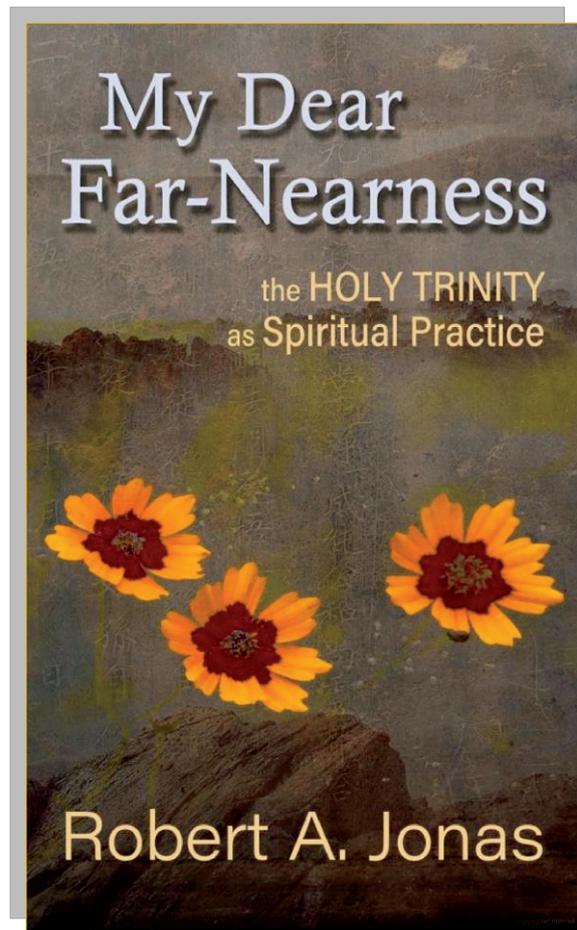
The obvious focus on joy in *Evangelii Gaudium* is seen in the sheer number of times that words such as joy, joyful, and joyfully are repeated (nearly 100 times). Pope Francis has mined the treasures found in the two interrelated apostolic exhortations written by Paul VI in 1975: *Evangelii*

Nuntiandi (Evangelization in the Modern World) and *Gaudete in Domino* (On Christian Joy). Both popes constantly assert that if the Gospel is not heard from “joyful evangelizers,” it will not be heard at all by contemporary humanity. The lack of joy and hope is an obstacle to effective evangelization. In the introduction of *Evangelii Gaudium* (10), Francis quotes extensively the sentiments of Paul VI who believed that joy would enable the world of our time “to receive the Good News not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 80).

The success of mission and evangelization requires “renewed evangelizers.” Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin once wrote: “Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.” Joy is convincing; joy evangelizes. All the daunting “signs of the times” and the complex dimensions of contemporary evangelization will not overwhelm those whose lives have been transformed by a joyful encounter with the Risen Lord. With heartfelt emotion, Pope Francis writes: “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ.... I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day” (3). “I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy” (1).

Missionary disciples must listen frequently to the admonition of Saint Paul: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near” (Phil 4:4). Be transformed by joy. Surrender to the “Lord of Joy” for he is: *Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring!* Become a joyful herald of missionary evangelization!

Father James H. Kroeger, MM, has served mission in Asia from 1970-2022. He holds both licentiate and doctorate degrees in Missiology from the Gregorian University in Rome. Orbis Books at Maryknoll has previously published: • *The Gift of Mission: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*; • *Once upon a Time in Asia: Stories of Harmony and Peace*; and • *Living Mission: Challenges in Evangelization Today*, and will publish *Walking with Pope Francis: The Official Documents in Everyday Language* in early 2023.



(Gift from ORBIS Books to SEDOS Library)

Intercultural Context and Mission

TALK GIVEN FOR JAPANESE AND KOREAN SISTERS OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE SISTERS OF THE CARITAS OF JESUS (CONGREGAZIONE DELLE SUORE DELLA CARITÀ DI GESÙ) ON THE 19TH OF SEPTEMBER 2022, CASA BETANIA, ROME.

Part One: Intercultural Living

In the first part of my presentation, I would like to give some suggestions regarding “intercultural living” or “international living” based on some studies and some experiences in the field.

From a multi-cultural community to an “inter-cultural” community

The very first important lesson in “intercultural communication” is that there is a difference between “*multi-national living*” and “*international living*”! It is not because we live with different nationalities together under one roof that we are also in dialogue with each other on a cultural level. You can compare it to a hotel where people live in their own rooms and eat the meals in a common place. There is no interaction among them. Also, Pope Francis complains that most of the colleges in Rome are more hotels than real religious communities. As such it is already a beautiful thing to live together without troubles in a community and to share table and prayer, but when money is in shortage, or when a confrere is sick, or when manual work is asked for, one can see whether or not the community is really a community. This also counts for international communities. One has to work for a community to become a real community with interactions. An international community has on top of that “intercultural interactions”.

A first strong suggestion is therefore *to look for “interaction” among the different cultures in a community.* For a community to become inter-

national, inter-cultural, one has to change his or her way of doing things from time to time in order to give space to each of the members, to live and share its cultural background in the community, to have an “inter-action” from which we learn about the other language, nationality, culture, food, religion. For instance, although we share the same Christian culture, the way we celebrate mass or pray is different. Japanese like a solemn celebration whereas people from Latin-America want to move their body and sing a lot. To make a prayer session from time to time in a different language, with other habits and forms, can bring out the difference from which we can learn, as far as possible of course. Sharing one’s culture and liturgical expressions helps the person to feel at home without giving the feeling that the other has to become a Congolese, Japanese, Korean, or Belgian. Or to have a meal from a different country, made by the person from that country. Eating Belgian chocolates from time to time is pleasant, or Japanese *sushi*, or Korean *kimchi*, at least for those who can stand raw fish or spicy food. Sometimes the community might prefer to have more of one kind, for instance more rice as pasta, but one always has to check the feelings of the whole group. Not all can stand Japanese *wasabi* or *natto*...☺

Be aware of cultural differences

There exist differences between cultures. When we take Eastern and Western culture as an example, we know that people from the East, such as my Indonesian friend, do not say things clear-cut as for instance in North America. You have to understand it from the way they talk. It is not because they say yes, and shake with their head, that it is the final answer to your question. In intercultural communication science this is called the difference between a **direct style** and an **indirect style** in *conflict styles*. For Westerners it looks as if you are talking around the problem, but that is the way it is done in the East.

Another difference are the *emotional styles*: **emotionally expressive style** versus **emotionally restrained styles**, which can be found all over the world, but also among individuals. In America one will rapidly say how beautiful, how great, how successful someone is, but in the East, it will cause the opposite effect. One may not say how much one knows about one's specialization. One should say that one does not know that much about it, and then the other understands that you know a lot about it...

The four styles together give the following grid:

	Restrained	Expressive
Direct	<i>Discussion</i>	<i>Engagement (blow)</i>
Indirect	<i>Accommodation</i>	<i>Dynamic (humor)</i>

Another cultural difference is how the respect towards superiors is shown: there are big-power gap societies and small-power gap societies, namely those where you have to respect strongly the social status of a person, and there were it is not that needed. I learned for instance at SEDOS that when I write to someone, I first use the prepositions of Father, Sister, Brother so and so, and when the other responds with just "Peter", I will do the same. In the end, none is better as the other. Both ways are ok and should be respected. For instance, the moment one is ordained a priest in Japan, even the close faithful will not use anymore your name, but will only say "shinpusama" (father). We did not like that as missionaries and approached it as a problem, but in fact it was/is not a problem, it was/is a cultural difference. The opposite is true for confreres from Africa working in Belgium. The confreres do not feel respected when they are called by their name, but in fact that is just the way the people show their respect to the priest by calling you by *your* name and not a general name. Seen from the Christian cultural habit, we are all brothers and sisters and there should be thus no difference between people, but to love the other is also to respect the other. If the big-power gap is based on respect, there is thus no problem. The problem comes when there is misuse of power, such as in the case of clericalism. And the same for small-power gap,

a too intimate relation with the priest causes jalousie from other parishioners.

Other differences are such as: do we decided by who gets the highest vote (democratic) or by a common decision, a "consensus"? Do we give priority to women or to men? Is the individual more important than the group? All things to reflect upon when living together with different cultural backgrounds. However, there is also a personal aspect in all of this as some might tend to a non-typical cultural stance. For instance, when I came to Japan, being a Belgian the people thought I would like to eat steak and smoke cigars and drink coffee and whiskey, but I am not that way... Only Belgian chocolates works with me... ☺ However, I do like social etiquette and for that I fit very well in the Japanese society with all its rules to behave in the house, at table, towards superiors etc.

Being aware of personal differences

In the same way, we tend to think that when there are problems in an international community it is because of the different cultures, but that might be a bit too simple as well. Culture is one thing, but personality is another! *Many problems in an international community are on a personal level*, because why can I be so happy with a sister of another country and not with one from my own country? It is therefore important to "discern" whether a problem among religious brothers or sisters is based on culture or on personality.

For instance, I lived already in different international communities, but cannot see always the difficulty of cultural difference when we share a common spirit and a common goal. We work and live together because we have chosen to do so. The logo of my congregation, CICM, is *Cor unum et Anima una*, one of heart and one of spirit, as it is written in the Bible. On the way we find out that there are different cultural habits, but when they are taken up in love and with understanding, it enriches the community. Sometimes, however, someone may use his or her cultural background as a way to hide a deeper personal problem. For instance, an Indonesian confrere of mine was not clear always when we took a decision and then did something else in the end. Still up to now I am not sure if he said so to protect himself. Thus, do not blame too fast a cultural difference as cause of the problem!

The aspect of personal differences we cannot deepen here further as it is not the topic of the day, but it is important to realize this difference between personal and cultural differences.

To live the local culture

A good suggestion in living together in a multinational community is *to place the culture in which one lives, the “host-culture”, at the base for all members* of the community. In CICM we have taken this up in our Statutes as part of a mission-spirituality of “Incarnation” into a society.

We adopt a lifestyle which brings us close to the people with whom we live. We share in their legitimate aspirations, their joys and their sufferings, and thus participate in the important moments of their life. (Article no. 13.1)

In this way one avoids discussion about which language to speak, the food one eats, the people one meets. The community I lived in the last years was speaking French in Italy, eating African in Italy, talking about Congo politics at table and watching French news... Only the Eucharist celebrations and the football games on television were in Italian as the language is not important there...☺ Because of not being sensitive in this way to the world of the other, it is not surprising that confreres from Asia do not like to join the meals any longer, and new confreres do not want to come over to Rome for study anymore. I had chosen that community, the CICM Collegio, in order to have the occasion to speak Italian but pity enough this was thought wrongly. The house rule, however, is that we should speak all Italian, but if the rector is not giving the example... And I know it is not only a problem for our Collegio, but also in many other collegio’s in town. Also on the level of food should be stressed that we eat what is the habit in Italy: pasta, pizza, spaghetti,... with of course some understanding for the food habits of the members. I encouraged for instance to have at least also rice with every meal instead of only pasta, because we did not grow up with pasta as Italians do... But by respecting the culture of the place we live in, we avoid the discussion of what should be the food, the prayer, the timing, and so on.

The world is becoming inter-cultural

Building international communities has become a way of doing mission. However, we should not be too much proud as missionaries or religious on our living together in the so-called “international communities”. The world is becoming more and more one, and so more and more families are multinational or multicultural these days. I was in Brazil for the holidays this summer and was impressed how people from so many a different background are living together there. Luckily, they speak the same language! Only when we can show how to live together as one family in an intercultural way can we give a good example and offer help to others who go through a similar process in their married life. A friend of mine in Japan, a very devout Catholic postman, got in love with a Korean lady who is an active member of the Japanese new religion called Soka Gakkai, a very nationalistic religion. He could not get married in the Church, and that is why he invited me to be present at least at his wedding feast; he could not let the children be baptized and that is why he asked me to give them a little cross on the forehead when the lady was out... They love each other and respect each other religious preferences, but it is not easy... And so, it is for us. It does not mean we do not love each other, but we have to learn first to accept that there are differences in cultural background, then we should wish to taste and participate in the other culture, appreciating the differences, and lastly coming to a deeper understanding of the cultural differences will make a community really INTER-cultural.

The Christian culture we all share

A suggestion in this connection is that *we should not forget that there is a culture that connects us: the Christian culture which goes beyond all nationalities.* You can see that when you deal with people who are not part of our Christian family. They do not understand when we give priority to the poor, when we do not want to be seated at the first place, when we do not seek to be rich and famous but share what we have, when we want to listen to God and obey to superiors ... things that Jesus taught us and that we want to live out. The vows are therefore that what unites us. Those who do not live them according to the three religious vows do not belong to our Christian community.

There will come a moment of Truth, for instance when he or she misuses money, has intimate relationships outside the community, or does not want to listen to the superior's advice, the person will then leave or will have to leave the community. The Christian culture is our culture as Christians and we are proud of it. Of course, missionaries in the past have confused this Christian culture with the Western culture, and brought their culture instead of the Christian teaching, as if the people we come to are like a *tabula rasa*, a blank paper where we can write on. We now know that it was wrong. Pope Francis advised it in his message to the Mission Symposium we organized for SEDOS last year in the following way:

*“His Holiness encourages proposals and their implementation that, avoiding to impose fixed cultural forms, reflect the nature of the people of God all holy and with a thousand faces.”*¹

There is also a difference within our Christian culture itself, namely the “ecclesial culture”. The assumption that we all have exactly the same vision of Church, ministry, religious life, and spirituality can lead to misunderstandings, resentments, and conflict. It is therefore tantamount to celebrate the Eucharist from time to time in another way in order not to get fixed into one form, and to give all members the occasion to show how they pray in their own local ecclesial culture or to share how the Church is lived in their own place. In Japan for instance, the priests go together to the public bath, being naked together with their bishop. This is not considered perverse in Japan but just an ultimate sign of trust and friendship.

And last, our Christian culture is now entering into a real dialogue with other religious culture, and this needs also some learning about inter-religious dialogue and how to adjust our ecclesial culture to the presence of people of other religions or atheists. We will talk about this more in the last part of today's lecture.

Going beyond culture

A last suggestion is that when we enter into another culture, *we should not always think that*

the other culture is completely different from ours. Cultures are not that different. Everywhere people want to greet, to eat, to pray, to talk. The difference lies only in the way we do this. Whether I greet by bowing like in Japan and Korea, or give a warm embrace like in Italy and Spain, the essence is that we greet each other, or not? When my mother had passed away in Belgium I was in Japan. The confreres there organized a memorial mass for her, and when the moment came for my confreres to show their compassion, confreres from different cultural backgrounds, they did it all in a Japanese way by bowing deep in front of me, and I myself responded in the same way to them. It felt so strong, almost stronger as the usual kiss on the cheek or an embrace would have been on that moment in that place. It shows of course that we all had become a bit Japanese. Do you know how an African greets?

When my Buddhist friends from Japan came to Italy for an interreligious dialogue, the rector of the university of Italy asked me how to greet the Japanese rector. I told them that normally it is by bowing, but knowing the Japanese they like to give a hand to foreigners. So, said, so done. Hands were shaken. But when the rector of the university in Japan where I studied Buddhism came to me, he bowed to me instead of giving me also a handshake. I understood from this that I had become a Japanese with the Japanese...☺

Interculturality, not a new issue

The problems we experience in living in an international community is not new. Already Jesus in his time had to deal with these differences in cultures. See for instance the discussion of Jesus with the Syrophenician woman from Cana (Mark 7:24-30; Mt 15:21-28) about his role as Messiah to Jews only, or not (bread and crumbs). And the first Christian community as well, if you can remember the discussion between Peter and Paul regarding what you can eat as a Christian or if circumcision is also obligatory for new converts (Galatians 2:11-19). Let us therefore not be discouraged by the difficulty in living together in a multi-cultural community, but to see it as invitation to open our mind and heart to the reality others are living in, as Jesus did as well.

¹ Peter Baekelmans, CICM, Marie-Helene Robert, OLA, edit., *New Trends in Mission, The Emerging Future* (New York: Orbis Books, 2022), p. xi.

Part Two: Intercultural Mission

The first part of my presentation was on intercultural *living*. We now enter into another aspect of interculturality, namely the intercultural *mission*. The new paradigm for mission is “interculturality”. But how do we do this? Let us start here from where we begin as missionaries, namely from the formation program, because this will form us to real “intercultural” missionaries.

Exit Learning and Entry learning

When we receive a mission destination, we not only have to learn about the culture of the mission country, which is *Entry Learning* (learning to leave) but also have to learn to leave behind our own culture, which is *Exit Learning* (learning to leave) We rapidly forget that we are born in a culture and carry with us that culture, willingly or not. In Japan I was repeatedly called “America-jin” even though I come from Europe. But for the Japanese I am a white skinned person with colored eyes and soft brown hair, something they associate with those to whom they lost the war. They feel less than the Americans because of the war, and one experiences therefore a kind of “positive discrimination” in Japan as American/European. One is given priority on certain public occasions while my Eastern confreres would be neglected. It is a bit like a priest entering the Vatican. Without the roman-collar you are treated differently as with, though the person is the same. Sometimes I forget I am wearing a Roman-collar and do not understand why some people are suddenly so kind to me... ☺

We tend to see the other through our own lenses. Being able to understand the other means being able to understand also yourself, the way your culture thinks, value things, look at things, etc. This can be learned! Let us go through the different steps to become a person open to the other culture but not blind to one’s own culture. This process is important for those going abroad, but the same for those opting to live in an international community. I follow here the teachings of Jon P. Kirby, SVD, as he brought it to the seminar on *Interculturality: Living and Mission* (2-6 May 2016).²

² Jon P. Kirby, “Intercultural competence for Religious Communities: Models, Gauges and Guides”, *SEDOS*

Exit Learning

We go through a process in leaving behind our ethnocentrism and accepting other cultural expressions by first **denying** that anything good can come from another culture. We think that our culture (religion) is the best. We need here to learn to be humble and submit ourselves as Christ did (*Phil. 2:5-8*). To be open to the reality. Meditation can help in this as it teaches a person to look at himself or herself as an outsider, critically and lovingly. This first step has to be done in the country of origin as it might be too difficult when confronted already with a possible culture-shock. Tribalism, nationalism, extremism are all aspects that indicate that the person has not yet opened him- or herself to another culture. At this stage, communities should strive for more inclusivity, and seek out experiences of other cultures or dimensions of difference. I wonder whether we can leave this stage completely behind. If I am honest, I am still working on this as it is almost impossible to eradicate some kind of superiority or inferiority feeling. Nevertheless, we do not give in to these feelings and try to see the beauty and greatness, but also the weaknesses of other cultures as well. When one opens oneself, there is still the tendency of going into the **defense**, namely defending the superiority of one’s own culture (and religion). We still feel threatened by another culture and view them by way of stereotypes. We say “Japanese are like that ...”, and “Koreans are like this...”. We make generalizations which is always dangerous. Not all Germans are Nazis, or priests child abusers. When one is in minority, there is a tendency to uncritically accept all of the other culture and rejects one’s own culture, which is also not healthy. For instance, when people are “going native”, or dislike the political situation in the country.

A next step in the process is that the differences are recognized, but **minimalized or trivialized** as not important. One has become “culturally sensitive”, but still largely ethnocentric. When a certain cultural group becomes the majority in the community or congregation, one has to remain vigilant not to impose unconsciously one’s own culture. My own Congregation is moving from a Belgian congregation towards a

Bulletin, Vol. 48, No. 5/6, pp. 23-37.

Congolese congregation. Is that bad? I always ask my older Belgian confreres when they oppose this evolution with the question: Was it then better when it was a Belgian congregation? We have to accept realities, but know how to deal with them. In the mission, one is always in a minority, but should therefore not minimize or trivialize the differences. Not everyone likes to eat raw fish, isn't it? Just to be honest is not a sin.

Entry Learning

Here one starts to “enter” into the world of the other culture and becomes really sensitive to the other culture, ready to put on the behavior, values and perspectives of the other culture. Intercultural mission starts here. There is first the **acceptance** of another culture. In Japan, one starts to eat sushi, go to the public bath, bow as the Japanese bow, and so on. There is a genuine interest and curiosity regarding the other culture. One starts to see cultural patterns from the perspective of the other. Why do one need to put slippers on when entering home, and others again when entering the toilet, why can't you boast about your success in front of others, etc. Cultural differences may be judged negatively, e.g. cannibalism or circumcision of girls, but these judgements are not always ethnocentric. Many missionaries remain on this level of acceptance of another culture.

A next step is then the willingness **to adapt oneself** to how the other does things and to be eager to see the world “through different eyes”. One can adapt without losing one's own principles or core values. I always had a hard time accepting the habit of eating raw fish that is still trembling on your dish, or to enjoy *balut* in the Philippines, cooked eggs in which the foetus of the chicken is present. It goes against my Biblical background: *thy shall not kill*. At the other hand, I did the whole practice to become a Buddhist priest of the Shingon school in Japan, including the fire ritual practice *Goma*, just to be able to understand how their rituals work compared to ours. More about this in the last part of our talk.

The final stage is the “**integration**” into one's own life and/or community. It is the ongoing process to integrate the cultures of the other, and one's own, into a new identity broadened by experience. For religious communities, this

means losses and gains for each person while giving birth to a new way of living in community, an inter-cultural way of living. When a new member comes in, the process has to be repeated in order that that person can feel at home, and can understand the other. In working together in the mission, also this “cultural sensitivity” is needed and add to the effectivity of the mission. Bringing the Gospel in an *inculturated* way becomes possible on this level.

Intercultural Competence Scale (ICS)

One can measure where a person is in the integration process. There are test to do so, the so-called Intercultural Competence Scale (ICS),³ but there is no “one size fits all” here! Maybe a good reflection on the 12 characteristics of a person who is intercultural competent by Muriel Elmer (ICS, 2000) might serve as well: 1) approachable, 2) intercultural receptive, 3) positive oriented, 4) forthright, 5) socially open, 6) enterprising, 7) showing respect, 8) perseverance, 9) flexible, 10) cultural perspectivism, 11) venturesome, 12) social confidence. Remark however that the fourth characteristic might be typical for an American, but not for an Asian...

This kind of questions are not always part of the evaluation of a candidate for mission. They may be worthwhile also for those going to work in an intercultural mission.

Working interculturally in an intercultural mission

After the formation comes the moment we work for the mission, and also there we can do it in a very Italian, Japanese, Belgian way, or in an inter-national and thus inter-cultural way. Many Congregations have started with international communities in their mission as a way of mission. By showing that they can live together as brothers and sisters “*though they come from the ends of the earth*” (Rudyard Kipling), then others can do it as well. But mission is more than living together, there is also work to be done. And here more creativity is asked for, because the persons in such an international community have each their task in the house, in the parish, in the school, but are not working

³ See, *SEDOS Bulletin*, Vol. 48, No. 5/6, p. 32.

therefore as a team. The Union International of Superiors General have initiated a program in Sicily in which not only sisters from different nationalities but also from different congregations work together in one missionary endeavor. Sr. Elisabeth Flick, former President of the UISG, shared about this experience at one of SEDOS conferences. She first mentions how much the younger religious have grown up in a multi-cultural world and are used to it through school, family, migrants, internet, inter-congregational novitiate and now also inter-congregational projects such as the South-Sudan Solidarity or the one in Sicily. The novelty of these inter-congregational projects is not the “works of mercy” as such, but the way they do it. Many missionary works have become pure social work, which social workers can do better indeed. Ours should be with a believing heart, showing the universal love that Christ taught us. The project in Sicily is for migrants. Ten sisters from different countries and from seven different Congregations work together in Sicily. They are migrants too, in a way, and that makes it easier for them to enter into the reality of migrants. Sr. Elisabeth tells us about this experience:

“The passion for God and for humanity is their reason to be together there. The common mission enlivens them and helps them to undertake with creativity arduous, totally unknown paths and leads them to invent new and different approaches, and to bravely face the inevitable difficulties, even the suspicion of the people towards all that is new and different.”⁴

Interculturality is thus a new paradigm for mission, not only for our religious communities. It is somehow logical that in a multicultural world, an intercultural mission is the best way of doing mission. I could see that already in Japan where in our parishes a great presence of Filipinas and Indonesians are present, and were thus my Philippine and Indonesian confreres could help those parishioners to integrate into Japanese society. Missionaries are “change-agents”, they help foreigners like them to integrate more easily into a new society and

culture. But for that we have to know both cultures well.

Intercultural monasteries

And what about monastic communities? I know that Claris monasteries can choose to be national, as the one in Kyoto, Japan, or to be international as the one in Bruges, Belgium. I sometimes wonder what the difference is between living in a monastery with people of the same country, or with people from different nationalities. Probably not that much. We all have to go through our sicknesses, old age, unfinished desires of when we were young, conflicts with those we can’t understand why the person do this or said that.

If you had the choice today, would you choose for a national or an international community? I for one entered CICM not because it was a Belgian Congregation in origin, but because it had become international and I was eager to meet with my confreres from all different places over the globe. My older confreres did not choose really for an international congregation, and that is why you feel that they more easily become discriminatory in the way they speak or think about confreres. I am the opposite. I chose for an international congregation and would not have entered if it was only Belgian. And so, do most of the young people today. The world is not anymore of one color but of a unity of colors. There is a joy in living and working together as one great family. Look at the twelve apostles how different they were and how different the cultural background they had! It did not hamper them to feel one. The one who fell out, Judas, was the one who had his own agenda, a personal problem. Multiculturality brings new life in a community. It only has to be guided in order to become fruitful. Here lies the task for those in leadership to help this integration process. For the moment, multiculturalism is still an option, but very soon it will be a reality to live with. At the same time, a new culture is coming up through globalization which facilitates the integration process. Who does not know Italian opera, Spanish songs, or not have eaten American hamburgers, French frites (in fact Belgian frites), Italian pizzas, Japanese *sushi* and Korean *kimchi*, or not have gone on pilgrimage to Rome, Assisi, Santiago di Compostela, Fatima, Lourdes, Guadalupe,

⁴ SEDOS Bulletin, Vol. 48, No. 5/6, p.53.

Aparecida, and so on...? Within this trend of globalization there is also a new need for identity. That is why young Christians tend to be more “conservative” as they feel that Christianity is losing its “flavor”, or “salt”. Finding the right balance between the own culture and the Christian culture in religious life is surely a task for the near future. I feel it in my own religious life already. This challenge is even greater in the dialogue with other religions about which we will share in the last part of this talk.

Part Three: Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is a specific form of intercultural exchange, namely the dialogue of religious thinking and religious behavior. How does a Muslim understand the compassion of God, and how behaves a Buddhist priest in his temple? To understand this one has to study the other religion and also take part to a certain extent to their religious behavior. Let us first discuss how to enter into “dialogue” with another religion.

Dominican Father Jean Druel, head of the Islamic research center in Kairo, teaches that there are four kinds of dialogue: scientific, dogmatic, emotional, and symbolical dialogue in his book *Je crois en Dieu! – Moi non-plus, Introduction aux principes du dialogue interreligieux*.⁵ The skill requested here is to know what kind of dialogue you are engaging in with another religion. When you are discussing the difference between religions on a scientific level, one should not mix it with bringing in a theological or emotional argument. When I say to a Muslim, Jesus is God, then this is a theological idea which he does not have to agree with. If I say that Jesus has lived, then this is a scientifically based fact that is not emotional, symbolic, or theological. In my new book *The Hidden “God”, Towards a Christian Theology of Buddhism*, I tried to make these differences clear on the level of the god of Buddhism. Normally it is said that there is no god in Buddhism, but is this a scientific, a theological, or an emotional idea? In fact, it is a missionary idea because it wants to differentiate Buddhism

from Christianity in which the existence of a god is the most important theological topic. So, I showed that scientifically speaking Buddhism recognizes the existence of gods, but not the god of the Bible, which is the unique creator personal god. But when entering the theological-philosophical field, one can discover several aspects that link Buddhist thinking about certain absolutes which come close to our thinking about God. This made me conclude that although Buddhism does not agree with the aspects of uniqueness, personality, or creator aspects of our God, what we have in common is the idea that God is in the end a hidden reality and we cannot know God to the full. For Muslims, for instance, there are 99 names of God, because the 100th name He has not revealed. Luther spoke of the “*deus absconditus*”, which is the basic reasoning about God in Christian theology. The idea of Emptiness is so essential in Buddhism that it can be understood as the way they experience God. They also teach us Christians that we should avoid too much reasoning about God. It is a non-conceptual reality, a mystic presence in this world.

Now, our Catholic Church speaks of four kinds of dialogue: dialogue of life, of experience, of theology, and of action.⁶ I place them in this order, as it would be the ideal way in interreligious dialogue: one first live among another religion, one then becomes interested in their way of living the faith, next one wants to understand the origin of their thoughts and actions, and lastly one wishes to work together in this world. When I entered CICM, I was given two possible mission destinations, one was Senegal where the confreres have opted for the dialogue of presence among the Muslims, without putting up big structures that can become an obstacle to dialogue, and the other one was Japan where especially two confreres where into the intellectual dialogue with other religions and started the Center of Religion and Culture at the Nanzan University, Nagoya. We also have a research center for religions, ORIENS, in Tokyo, which became more a catholic publication house than a place for

⁵ Jean Druel, *Je crois en Dieu ! – Moi non plus, Introduction aux principes du dialogue interreligieux* (Paris : Cerf, 2017).

⁶ Dialogue and Proclamation (Vatican City : Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, 1991), chap. 3, no.42.

dialogue. It was difficult for me to choose between Senegal and Japan as I had been already in Senegal where my oldest brother had started a “Salon du The et du Glacier”, and where I made a wise Muslim friend. Japan was thus the great unknown to me, which as a missionary is always the most attractive, and because I had to admit that I like studying, Japan became my choice.

My relation with the Senegalese Muslim friend is interesting because he belonged to one of the active Muslim prayer schools, but when I brought him to Coeur Moussa outside Dakar, he wanted to become a Catholic monk. I told him not to change so fast of religion, and when I met with him again a few years ago, after more than 30 years, I saw him taking care of the monks of Coeur Moussa as a medical doctor and joining the masses, even for communion, though remaining a devout Muslim, married now and graced with two daughters. I saw a bit myself in him, because also I myself am a Catholic believer, but when I join the Zen monastery in Okayama, Shogenji, it is as if I am a Zenmonk on that moment, joining them in all their activities. One easily speaks of “double religious belonging” in that case, but it is not so. One knows the religion one belongs too, but is open to other religious expressions and groups. From the start of my missionary life in Japan I had a good contact with Buddhists. Especially Rev. Yamanouchi Yugen of Tokoji in Nara where I went to help in the garden or the temple whenever I had the time. This was on the level of the dialogue of life. I admired him as he did other activities besides being a priest, namely baking and selling natural yeast bread and teaching *Futari Yoga*, a way to cure people through pressing with the foot the body of the partner. I can show you a few pictures here of this dialogue of life.

Another great experience with Japanese Buddhism was my experience of sitting in Zazen. I had read a lot about Zen before, but to sit together in zazen for hours in a row was a great experience. Even when too cold or too hot, one has to remain seated in order to train the mind to listen to you and not the other way around as is most of the case. I had done some meditation on my own before coming to Japan, and my first introduction to the power of meditation was imagining that my parents were

dead. I was living in Lugano, Switzerland, in that time, and internet or cellphones did not exist encore. If I wanted to know if they would be really dead, I had to wait for information from home that would take at least three days. And so, I started to think that they might be really dead. I got scared, and cried, because that possibility became a reality to me. The first thing I did the next morning was going to the next town where there was an international phone box. My mother took the phone and asked me, *Well Peter, why do phone because that is expensive you know...* I did not dare to say that I thought they had died, but I was so happy to hear her voice ... ☺ Since that time, I became really grateful to the parents, always happy that they were still alive. Now both are in heaven, and I have no regret that I might not have shown them enough my love. In preparation for the diaconate, I asked for a one-month stay at the temple and asked the Indian monk there to shave my hair. It had taken me several years to decide for that experience as I was much attached to my hair. It was great to feel my own bold head as if you are just born. Since that moment I also have no fear to lose my hair, and instead am happy I still have a bit... It took me seventeen years before my body and mind were able to take part in the *Rohatsu*, ten days of only sitting in zazen. I will show you some pictures of this kind of dialogue of experience. These experiences have helped me in understanding later on Buddhism more profoundly.

For my doctoral studies, I had chosen to compare the theology behind our sacraments with the reasoning behind Buddhist sacraments, the so-called Three Mysteries in the Shingon school of Esoteric Buddhism in Koyasan, Japan. And I not only wanted to make this study on the level of scriptures, but also on the level of experience, a phenomenological study. The difficulty to do this was that I had to get initiated in order to be able to participate in the religious practice to become a Buddhist priest. I saw once the first initiation, called *Tokudo shiki*, and thought to myself: how come I would do something within Buddhism which I had not dare to do yet in my own religion? That experience become the reason for my accepting to become a Catholic priest first. I was already seven years a religious brother but was afraid to

take the next step. That was what I realized through this encounter. Then there was a friend Buddhist priest and scholar, Rev. Habukawa Shodo, at Koyasan who was willing to give me the possibility to join the practice without joining the initiation. So, I gladly accepted. However, just a few days before I would start the first three weeks of practice, he let me know I was welcome to join also for the initiation. As this was a genuine proposal, I could not refuse, though my Zen teacher and Yoga teacher, both great spiritual teachers, were not in favor. I therefore started the practice with a little heart, thinking that I might commit some spiritually great fault, but as the practice evolved, I could see it brought me the insights I needed. The summum of the practice is the fire ritual, *Goma*, which started just on the day I had done my first mass ten years before. I was offered in the end to also take the last initiation to become a Buddhist priest, *Denpo Kanjo*, but that I kindly refused as it might confuse people what I am in the end. There was though a small moment of hesitation because I could see that I also could help people through this kind of rituals. But God gave me a clear sign that this is not my way. I will show you some pictures of this dialogue of theology.

The fourth and last form of dialogue among religions is the action, there were we to something together to make this world a better place. Also, here there are many possibilities to be active together. My first mass was an interreligious mass where Buddhists and Hindus were present. Further, we have organized several times an interfaith chanting as this permits us to be together in a religious way, and signing is twice praying. I also helped a theological dialogue about Art and Religion between monks from Koyasan and theologians from Firenze for one week in Florence and one week in Koyasan. My first book was written for the theologians to explain what Shingon religion is about. As director of SEDOS, I have organized also some ecumenic celebrations, interreligious dialogues, and seminars on the topic. The most beautiful moment for me was the Interreligious Pilgrimage to the Holy Door in 2016. Before the closing of the Holy Door, I wanted to go there together with people from other religions as they too wanted to have that experience. And as the Holy Door of 2016 was

in the context of forgiveness, we asked forgiveness to other religions for what we have done wrong in the past as missionaries. The presence of other religious persons was great, and it became a very meaningful moment.

Raising intercultural competence

Greeting is one thing, but thinking is another. We have to become able to make the translation between cultures/religions and to understand how the other culture/religion thinks. *There is therefore an urgent need for "intercultural competence"*. In order to stimulate this process, I have collected for instance during my time as pastor of the University Parish in Louvain, Belgium, a number of stories from different cultures and then put these two or three stories together who have a common message but from a different cultural context, or showing that a similar story in different cultures exists but with different understanding. By comparing these two stories one can more easily grasp the meaning of each as well. Let me give here one example.

The wind and the fan (Zen story)

Zen master Baoche was fanning himself some fresh air with a fan.

A monk passed by and asked him: 'Master, the wind is everywhere and reaches all the places of the world. Why do you use then still a fan?'

Baoche answered: 'You understand already that the wind is everywhere, and that it reaches all the places of the world. But you do not grasp yet the nature of the wind.'

The farmer and Holy Providence (Christian story, by Luc Versteyle)

There was once an English farmer who was ploughing his land.

And while he was ploughing, a dominee came by and they talked a little.

'What a marvellous field', the dominee said.

'Yes', said the farmer.

'And what a great cooperation between the effort of man and the blessing of the Holy Providence.'

'Yes', said the farmer.

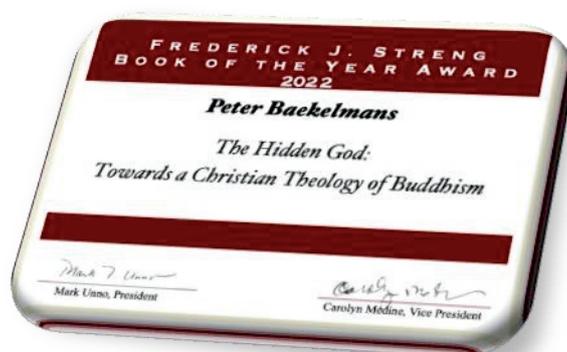
'You do not seem to be very enthusiastic', said the dominee.

'No', said the farmer.

‘Don’t you find these thoughts not inspiring then?’

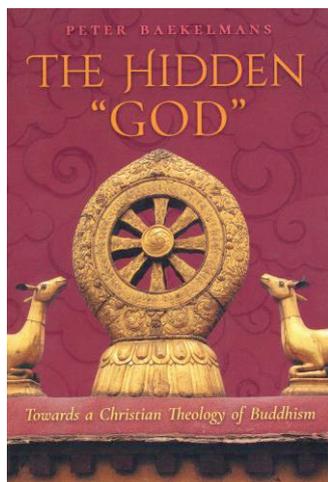
‘For sure’, the farmer said, ‘but you should have come when the Holy Providence has been working here on her own.’

We see here that cooperation between the Divine (wind or nature) and Human Being (using a fan or ploughing the land) is needed. In the same way, if God blessed diversity by creating a so diverse world, why should we kill the diversity? Our task is to understand the diversity of culture and to make the best of it. The world is interconnected, and so should we be! We should live the difference, not the indifference.



Fr. Peter Baekelmans, CICM, received the “Frederick J. Steng Book of the Year Award 2022” from the *Academic Society of Buddhist-Christian Studies* in North-America for his latest book: *The Hidden “God”, Towards a Christian Theology of Buddhism* (New York: Angelico Press, 2022). Fr. Peter explains the importance of this book:

As a theologian, specialized in Theology of Religions, I am interested in the experience of God within other religions, especially in the Buddhist faith and practice. There exists in the West the idea that “there is no god in Buddhism”, but I always felt that as incorrect. God is universal, and



so there should be an experience of God also within Buddhism. But what is then their idea and experience of God, and what can we learn from it?

The word Dharma (Teaching, Truth) comes close to our understanding of God, but then in a non-personal way, a God we cannot describe, a “hidden” God. Even Christian theology always has guarded the mystery of God, and it is this mystical experience of God as the One beyond all, the One within all, the great power, that the Buddhists cherish and want to safeguard from people (especially theologians) who think too fast that they “know” God.

For Buddhists, the Dharma is the mystery of the Void, the interrelatedness of all, the greatness of the human mind, and the power behind the universe. In these four aspects of the Buddhist faith experience we discovered a certain relationship with the

Christian experience of God, and have expounded on that in this book for the sake of interreligious dialogue.

Identities and Universalisms in the Missionary Context of India

India is one of the most ancient civilizations in the world, with a history of at least five thousand years and one of the most diverse cultures in the world. India has carved its own universal identity as home to diverse religions, ethnicities, cultures, languages, and lifestyles, yet, thriving together as one nation. Diversity, adaptability, tolerance, and harmony are deeply engrained in the religious texts and the Indian Constitution as well as in the hearts and minds of people. Over the centuries, these diversities have not only co-existed but also mutually enriched and even gave birth to new religions, through the fusion of religious-cultural identities. This is the product of a dynamic cultural exchange among the religions, without sacrificing identities.

All the characteristic diversities and complexities of India as a nation are visible in Indian Christianity as well. India has three Catholic Churches or Rites, several groups of Orthodox Christians along with almost all Protestant and Evangelical denominations, not to mention the sub-denominations of Indian origin. Indian Christians are ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and ritually diverse, yet are proudly Christians. They are actively engaged in evangelization by proclaiming the Gospel by word and deed. Their contribution to nation-building is much larger than their numbers.

In this article, I will focus on the subtleties of identities and universalisms in India, primarily from a religious perspective, particularly of Christian mission. We will start by looking at the overall Indian reality of identities, followed by a look at the Christian identities situating it in the contemporary Indian context. In the present era of globalization, many think that technology has ushered in an era of universalism, dissolving identities in its onslaught. In fact, just the opposite is true, increased globalization is leading to a resurgence of identity consciousness that

threatens universalism. Identities and universalisms cannot exist, one without the other. Based on the analysis of the Indian Christian reality, we can learn that identities and universalisms are in a relentless flux of co-existence and/or dominance, mutual enhancement and/or distortion, never ever to settle.

1. The Religious Identity of India

Religion plays a vital role in the lives of Indians and India is home to almost all the world religions, besides all the Indian folk religions. Yet India is a secular democratic republic according to its constitution. While religious identities are strictly maintained, tolerance is treasured as a great value by all Indians. A major Pew Research Survey of religion across India in 2019 has found that religious tolerance is a civic and religious value for all Indians: “Across the major religious groups, most people say it is very important to respect all religions to be truly Indian. ... Indians are united in the view that respecting other religions is a very important part of what it means to be a member of their own religious community.”¹

Despite the age-old tradition of religious and cultural tolerance, contemporary India is undergoing an identity crisis, partly produced by globalization and identity politics. The majoritarian quest for hegemony and homogeneity threatens the identity and existence of minorities and challenges the age-

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/06/29/-religion-in-india-tolerance-and-segregation/>. This Pew Research Center Survey of religion across India was based on nearly 30,000 face-to-face interviews of adults, (including 22,975 who identify as Hindu, 3,336 who identify as Muslim, 1,782 who identify as Sikh, 1,011 who identify as Christian, 719 who identify as Buddhist, 109 who identify as Jain and 67 who identify as belonging to another religion or as religiously unaffiliated), conducted in 17 languages between late 2019 and early 2020.

old universalisms present in the sub-continent. The multi-religious identity of India has turned volatile and ambivalent in recent times.

1.1. An age-old civilization of Tolerance

India is the birthplace of 4 world religions, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, not to mention the number of tribal religions in India. Hinduism is the primaeval religion of India, described as *Sanadhana Dharma*, from which different religions originated. India is also home to all other world religions such as Parsees, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam already from the early years of their origin. In addition, two syncretic religions were created in India. In 1582, the Mughal emperor Akbar, declared a new religion under the name *Dīn-i-Ilāhī*, literally meaning religion of God or divine religion, in a futile attempt to merge the various religious identities of his subjects into one new universal religion. This new religion did not endure even in his own lifetime. A century ago, Baha'i faith was born as the newest global belief system, which teaches the oneness of God, the unity of humanity, and the essential harmony of religion. It is particularly noteworthy for our reflections that the universalization of various religions into one is never successful.

1.2. Independence struggle as a catalyst

In the year 1947 India gained political freedom and a new identity as a modern nation, under the visionary leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and other freedom fighters, along with a handful of far-sighted European missionaries. However, on the same day of independence, the Indian subcontinent was partitioned along religious lines into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan, causing millions of people to find a new identity and migrate to the nation of their religious affinity. It did not take much time or perceptible forces to suddenly change loyalties and redefine belongingness and identity.

While Pakistan chose to evolve into an Islamic republic, India, fortunately, chose to be a secular nation with a constitution (1950) that hails democratic and secular values². Thus, the

² Article 15 of Indian Constitution forbids discrimination on the basis of race, religion, caste, gender or place of birth, while Article 25 guarantees freedom of conscience and the free practice and propagation of religion. The

long-standing spirit of diversity was merged into the Indian national identity, essentially as a celebration of the diversity of languages, cultures, religions, and ethnicities. Even 70 years into independence, the post-independent ideals of secularism and unity in diversity are still the mainline ideology in India. Despite all signs of turmoil and polarizations and even occasional extremist and violent clashes, the post-independence ideal of secularism and religious tolerance is still the mainline attribute of what it means to be “truly Indian.”

We have a clear case of how the absolutization of identities and narrow thinking can split nations and generate unending animosity and conflicts. While the freedom struggle served as a positive force in favour of sustaining universal values and principles for creating one nation out of 600 small kingdoms, a narrowly defined identity politics worked equally powerfully to create two nations out of one in a matter of days, splitting families and creating artificial borders and a permanent enmity.³ Identities are so brittle and subtle enough to consolidate into new reality perceptions, ignoring universal ideals.

1.3. The changing scenario and the ambivalence of identities and universalisms

India is once again going through another identity crisis, due to identity politics by right-wing ideologies of the majority community. With the rise of Sangh Parivar or the Hindu nationalist movements and the controversial policies of the nationalist government in office since 2014 at central and state levels, there is a condensation of Indian identity into Hindu identity in political, social, cultural and even religious spheres. The leaders of the right-wing organization, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) do not shy to contend that everyone who lives in ‘Bharat’ is already a Hindu, and there

meaning of ‘secular’ in India is different from the western sense of secular vis-à-vis religious. The term secular in India means, neither favouring nor denouncing any one person, culture, religion, ethnicity, or language.

³ The partition of India generated never-ending animosity between two newly born nations, India and Pakistan fought two battles and a proxy war ongoing with never-ending enmity and hatred and destruction. Even a cricket match between India and Pakistan is viewed as a full-scale war.

are no 'Ahindus' (non-Hindus) but only 4 types of Hindus — 'proud, reluctant, unfriendly, ignorant.' They dream of turning India into a 'Hindu Rashtra' with the ideal of 'one nation, one culture, one religion', where every citizen adopts the Hindu way of life under a new constitution.

The Christians, Muslims, and some of the tribals oppose clubbing everyone under Hinduism. To them, Hinduism is not just a way of life but a religion. The Tribals, Christians, and Muslims have different religions and ways of life, and they are Indians⁴. They fear that the RSS ideology of the supremacy of the Hindu race and religion could even lead to the suppression of others as subservient and second-class citizens.

Many optimists think that politically driven Hindu nationalism, or Hindutva, cannot ultimately damage the fabric of Indian communities because of the tolerance to diversity unique to India. However, the supremacist dogma of coalescing majority religious identity into national identity through electoral politics⁵ is slowly leading to polarization of the Indian society for fear of minorities being deprived of their ancestry, culture, and religion. The traditional Indian ideal of tolerance has tilted towards a "tolerant but separate"⁶ identity among followers of different religions.

⁴ It is to be noted that Christianity and Islam reached the first century of their origin and existed in India, without ever seeking supremacy or dominance. 500 years of Muslim rule or 300 years of European (Christian) rule did not challenge the fabric of fraternity in the nation. The new-found religious identity became defining and dividing factor not only between India and Pakistan but also among all followers of religions of both Indian and non-Indian origin.

⁵ The elicitation of religious sentiments for political gains is more destructive and harder to heal than any other rivalries because religion is a deep-rooted and non-negotiable sentiment.

⁶ Pew research also indicates that more and more Hindus, especially those who voted BJP "tend to see their religious identity and Indian national identity as closely intertwined," the survey found, with nearly two-thirds (64%) saying it is "very important to be Hindu to be 'truly' Indian." And to speak Hindi to be authentically Indian.

2. Identity of the Christians in the Indian polity

Christianity in India dates to the first century. The ancient Christian community of Kerala, known as Thomas Christians, after St. Thomas the Apostle, was an integral part of South India. The second phase of Indian Christianity begins in the sixteenth century with the arrival of European missionaries. While more Christian communities got established all over India, starting primarily in coastal areas, Christianity began to be known as a foreign religion of the colonialists. The third phase of Christianity in India belongs to the post-Independence period when indigenous missionaries moved to the whole of India and established missions and started educational, medical, charitable and development work, along with the proclamation of the Gospel and the establishment of the Church.

2.1. The Apostolic Church of Thomas Christians

St. Thomas the Apostle arrived in India in AD 52 along with Jewish traders and established 7 Christian communities or churches in Kerala, then known as the Malabar coast.⁷ There is an unbroken tradition and presence of a robust community in Kerala known as Thomas Christians, with strong Aramaic roots. Patristic and other ancient documents as well as early European and middle eastern travelers have amply testified to the existence of apostolic Christianity in India.

Ancient Christianity in India had a unique identity, described as 'Christian in faith, Oriental (Syrian) in worship and Indian in culture.' They embraced the Christian faith without sacrificing their cultural heritage and were well accepted by the population. It was also closely linked to the sister church in Persia, because of the apostolic connection, as St Thomas is believed to have founded both Churches. The Persian Church sent prelates, through whom the Syrian liturgical traditions and prayers were adopted at least from the fourth century. The Thomas Christians formed a

⁷ Recent scholarship has suggested that St Thomas had evangelized North-western India on his first trip to India via the silk route. However, no traces of that community are yet unearthed.

unique community of Christians who guarded their Christian, oriental and Indian identities and lived in perfect harmony with other religions and other Churches. It is a perfect example of an enculturated Christian community, where identity and universalism are in perfect balance.

2.2. Arrival of European Christianity and Evangelization of India

The second wave of Christianization started in the sixteenth century with the arrival of the Portuguese, Spanish and English colonizers. While the native Christianity was limited to the Malabar coast, the European missionaries started missionary activity all over India and both Catholic and Protestant Christianity, as they existed in then Europe began to take root in India, especially among the coastal lines. While Spanish-Portuguese missionaries spread Roman rite Catholicism, Anglican and German missionaries planted Protestant varieties of Christian faith in various parts of India. As Christianity spread to other parts of India through the European missionaries, began to be perceived as the religion of the colonizers, a foreign religion of recent religion.

The arrival of the European Christians negatively impacted the native Christians too. Finding the native Christianity different, the Portuguese and Spanish missionaries set on a mission to purge it of 'heretical' elements by replacing the hierarchy with Europeans, recasting priestly formation, burning the liturgical books, and introducing the Roman liturgy. The forced 'annexation' and 'Romanization of Malabar Christianity was accomplished by the colonizers through the Synod of Diamper in 1599. The growing tensions finally led to the split of Thomas Christians in 1653 through the Koonan Cross oath. The re-casting of the 1500-hundred-year-old Christianity into the Roman garb led to the splitting up of the Thomas Christians into a group that valued loyalty to the Pope above traditional practices and another group that valued the 'way of Thomas' above the 'way of Peter'. Today the original Thomas Christians of India comprise of two catholic and several orthodox and Jacobite churches.

2.3. Christianity in the post-independence India

After Independence, Indian Christians quickly moved into leadership and widespread missionary activities.

However, the westernized lifestyles, church organization, liturgical rituals, and music continued, although Christians in India tried to adapt to Indian religiosity and adopted a lot of Indian practices. One major reason is the higher education of the clergy in European universities and the continuation of the same theology and formation system in Indian seminaries. Although Indian Christians aspire to look more Indian, inculturation is not a mainline feature, except in specialized centres and Ashrams which have adopted Indian religious ideals, theological ideas, lifestyle, art and architecture, music, and rituals in their quest to be truly Indian and truly Christian.

Most Indian Christians value their faith and religion as very important, in life and share with other Indians a profound sense of the divine and a religious outlook on life as common characteristics of all Indians. The church is part of their social life like a second home for many. Sunday worship, evening family prayer, personal prayers, fasting and other ascetic observances, giving money to Church, reading the Bible, and special devotions like the rosary, novenas, and pilgrimages mark their life cycle.⁸ Like the rest of Indians, Christian festivals attract huge crowds, processions, bands, and fireworks. Along with several Christianized rituals adopted from temple rituals, some beliefs rituals and customs, superstitions, and celebrations rooted in the Hindu religion too have crept into Christians. Amidst people of other faiths, Christians maintain their distinctive identity and faith and yet live in harmony and friendship with all others, sharing their national epics and celebrating national festivals like Diwali and Onam. The distinctive identity of the Indian Christians is that they render educational, medical and development services mostly benefitting the non-Christians.

⁸ Ariana Monique Salazar, "8 key findings about Christians in India," <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/07/12/8-key-findings-about-christians-in-india/>, JULY 12, 2021.

2.4. Demography of Indian Christians

The picture of Christianity in India cannot be complete without investigating the demography of Indian Christians. Christians make up hardly 2.4% of the 1.3 billion population of India, making roughly 32 million Christians, nothing compared to roughly 180 million Muslims and 980 million Hindus. The Christians are geographically distributed in the South, North-East and coastal regions of India. About half of the Christians live in South India and make the majority religion in a few small North-Eastern states. Approximately 37% of Indian Christians are Catholic, belonging to 3 different rites, two eastern and one the Roman Latin rite, 13% Baptists, 7% Church of North India and 7% Church of South India and 36% of other Eastern and evangelical denominations. There is no significant cohesion among the various denominations, rendering Christian identity vulnerable.

Another demographic factor is that a disproportionately large number (57%) of Indian Christians identify with Scheduled Castes (33%) and Scheduled Tribes (24%), and, unfortunately, they face discrimination in the Church and in the nation. With conversion, their religious affiliations change but the stigma of 'low origin' continues to stick with them and they are forced to forfeit their right to reservations in educational institutions and in Government jobs. This is a blot on Indian Christianity that Dalit converts are still at a position of disadvantage from perceptible educational and economic disparity, hardly any inter-marriages, few priests and religious from the community until recently and, in some places, separate churches and burial grounds. Despite all the apparent disadvantages, Dalits are keen to embrace Christianity for spiritual reasons, like the idea of a liberating God, who has power over evil spirits – Dalits are really benefitting exorcisms and healing prayers – and the physical, psychological, and spiritual healing they experience.

3. Christian Mission in the Ambivalent Conditions of the Day

We have seen above that tolerant religious India is slowly going through an identity crisis and turning virulent for motives mostly political. Since the 1990s, Hindu activists have gained momentum, putting forward the narrative that Muslims and Christians are not true Indians and they worship a foreign God. Eleven states in India have already put in place anti-conversion laws⁹, fondly named 'freedom of religion law' under the pretext of protecting the Hindu religion. They are also pushing for such a law at the national level. Despite there being no data about forced conversions taking place and the consistent census data showing that the Christian population in India are not growing, Hindutva groups are accusing Christians of mass conversions¹⁰.

The anti-conversion laws form a great challenge to Christian missionary activity because the Hindu fringe groups use it as a weapon to restrict the religious freedom of the minority faith groups and to obstruct even innocent Christian activities like worship in the church, singing Christmas carols, private gatherings and even blocking humanitarian aid and persecuting those who have genuinely become Christians from a Hindu background. Christian United Forum reported 486 violent acts 2021 and 127 in 2022 against Christians. It is notable that the states with anti-conversion laws account for more incidents of violence against Christians than all the other states combined. Strangely, these laws often exclude or tacitly permit

⁹ The wording of the law generally states that 'no person should convert or attempt to convert, either directly or indirectly, any person from one religion to another by use of force or by allurement or by any fraudulent means.' As such they look right, no one should be converted by force or allurement and there is constitutional protection against it.

¹⁰ Mostly this accusation gained momentum with the publication of the book *Harvesting Our Souls: Missionaries, Their Design, Their Claims*, by Arun Shourie in 2000. It is interesting to note that Shourie was invited by the Catholic Bishops to talk on "The Hindu perception of the work of Christian missionaries in India", at the Pune Consultation to review the work of the Church in India, in connection with the celebration of fifty years of the existence of the CBCI in 1994. In that meeting, he was given various church documents for his review and he published his book in 2000.

conversions and re-conversions to Hinduism, even by force, or inducement, calling it *Ghar Vapasi* meaning ‘return to the religions of one’s forefathers. Another weapon used by state machinery against Christians is the strict scrutiny and restriction of foreign funds received by Christians, under the pretext that it is being used for mass conversions.

The religiously carved nationalism has, thus, succeeded to some extent to depict the Christian mission as suspicious and anti-national activity at least in the mind of some of the population. Even the educational, developmental, and charitable works by Christians are interpreted as a hidden agenda for conversion. This has made evangelization a challenging activity. The institutional approach to mission followed by the Catholic Church and the direct proclamation of the Word followed by Protestant and Evangelical Christians are equally impacted by the organized opposition and propaganda of the growing number of ultra-nationalists. Christians in India have hearkened to the advice of Paul Timothy, and are determined to “proclaim the Word ... ready when the time is right and even when it is not [*keeping a sense of urgency, whether the opportunity seems favourable or unfavourable, whether convenient or inconvenient, whether welcome or unwelcome*]; ... with inexhaustible patience and [*faithful*] teaching.” (2Tim 4:2, the Amplified Bible). For all Christians “evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 18) and that is happening through the collective and individual witness of the Church and Christians through their service and sufferings. Mission continues despite opposition and persecution.

4. Universalization of Identities vs identification of Universals

After analyzing the interplay of identities and universalisms in the Indian religious scenario, we will briefly look at the relationship between identities and universalisms. Unlike the balance of identities in Europe thanks to secularization and religious homogeneity, different identities in India are combined like a rainbow of colours, making the Indian reality more complex. India

is a land of diversity where one gains his identity amidst myriads of others who are different and yet share a lot in common to make one nation. At the same time, Indians have witnessed the break-up of India in the name of religious identities. The age-old culture of religious tolerance and unity in diversity is once again threatened by the political maneuvers to absolutize the majority religion and culture as the unique identity of the nation.

In matters of religion and culture, no individual religion or culture can exhaust Indianness. Identities and universalisms exist in a constant dialectical dynamic, sans permanent resolution. We can never have one and only one universal interpretation, but many interpretations of one universal reality of God. What is common to many interpretations makes the universal possible. Thus, diversity is the foundation of universalism, rendering both oversimplifying harmonization and absolute diversity equally untenable. Pope Francis describes “an authoritarian and abstract universalism” that seeks to eliminate all differences and tradition as “a superficial quest for unity” and a “one-dimensional uniformity.” “This false universalism ends up depriving the world of its various colours, its beauty and, ultimately, its humanity. ... human family needs to learn to live together in harmony and peace, without all of us having to be the same.” (FT100).

In philosophy, the relationship between identity and universalism can be equated to the oldest and the hardest philosophical problem of one and many. One is one and many are many by the very reason of identities. Universal is an ulterior reference point based on religious, cultural, social, or political identities. Overemphasis on otherness leads to chaos, while the absolutization of the oneness leads to totalitarianism. Universalism is possible only when identities are maintained in dynamic tension. In other words, universalism is oneness in many-ness.

In history, the same dynamics is described as particularism and universalism.¹¹ All historical events are particular and different particulars existing in dialectical tension create the universal because the particular is rooted in the

¹¹ Nathan Rotenstreich, “Universalism and particularism in history,” in *The Review of Metaphysics*, 37, No. 1 (1983), pp. 21-36.

universal and the universal is manifested in the particular. This makes it possible for different circles of history to exist side by side, creating common spaces wherever they overlap, indicating that people of the same nation can share different histories according to their identities. In the Indian context, Hinduism cannot be universalized, because the fabric of India consists of all religions, cultures, diversities of languages, customs, and traditions. Indianness is an idea shared by most Indians, without losing their own particular religious, cultural and social identities, and hence, the monopolization of Indianness by the Hindutva group is unjustified and counterproductive to the national identity itself.

In nature too, the sustainability of the natural ecosystem depends on the diversity of the species living therein, because intra-species competition for the same resources is often more violent than inter-species competition, which is complementary. Diversity increases sustainability. Even in human ecosystems, history teaches that diversified societies prosper better than totalitarian ones. Where identities are respected and fostered, individuals and groups contribute more to the common good. Hence a universalism beyond functional common laws and agreements is not conducive to a peaceful and harmonious society.

Conclusion

The dynamics of identity and universalism in a multi-religious, multicultural, and multiethnic society like India, is one of the self-segregating religious identities vacillating between 'tolerance and segregation,' in an apparent effort to find peaceful coexistence. The dynamics of identities and universalism are potent to birth friendship and animosity, creation and destruction. The assumed and attributed identities in India have wreaked havoc in India at the partition, and today the politicization of religious identities has generated religious hatred and violence surpassing caste-based and even criminal violence in the nation. The unity in diversity is the beauty of India and hence the present effort of the majority to homogenize the society is dangerous to the Indian identity as a tolerant and peaceful nation.

Christianity in India was and is truly Christian and truly Indian. Indian Christians are not only keen to adapt to the Indian cultural and religious practices, but they are also less probable to segregate themselves from people of other religions or cultures, despite hatred and persecution from them. The Church esteems the followers of all the other religions (NA2) and "has a high regard for their manner of life and conduct, their precepts and doctrines", yet, as Pope Francis says, Christians are convinced that they cannot let "the music of the Gospel" cease to resonate in the hearts, homes, and public sphere because "the wellspring of human dignity and fraternity is in the Gospel of Jesus Christ." (FT277)

Christians in India maintain their distinctive identity and faith and yet live in harmony and friendship with all others, because, as *Fratelli Tutti* 30 expresses it beautifully, "isolation and withdrawal into one's own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about renewal." With this spirit, Christians continue to render educational, medical, and social services mostly benefitting most non-Christians, especially the poor and the marginalized, in India. The representative Christian figures like Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Graham Steins of Orissa, Tribal Christians of Kandhamal, Sr Rani Maria of Indore and Father Stan Samy were more Indian in their lifestyle, attitude and love for the nation and its people, than most self-proclaimed nationalists. They are just a few luminaries from among the hundreds of Christian missionaries who render selfless service to Indians. Christians believe that all human beings belong to a single human family, and hence, what India needs today is a "culture of encounter", engagement and closeness (FT30) to transform humanity from within through the power of the Gospel.

(Ref.: *Spiritus - Revue d'expériences et de recherches missionnaires*, n° 249 Décembre 2022 Published in French : *Identités et universalismes*, pp. 455 - 469).

Mission in the African Church in the Light of Sexual Abuse and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The topic of sexuality is one that many people in cultures throughout the world have difficulty discussing openly, even with close family members. Culture, family, power and authority pose difficulties in understanding the gravity of sexual abuse in any place. When people don't feel comfortable speaking about sexuality, the sexual misbehavior and more so of the sexual misbehavior of authority figures like priests, religious, and other people within the church become even more difficult. Though much has been done to know the truth in this regard, we have to acknowledge that this will be a long journey; but there are already some people and institutions that are working toward a change of mentality and for the implementation of effective measures against abuse. In the light of sexual abuses in the church today which are unearthed in various countries, we try to understand the situation in the African church and how we can respond to this situation with a sense of justice. Our mission is integral; we are part of the process of transforming the world, thus this sexual abuse concerns cannot be at bay.

We are in a fragile world. COVID-19 pandemic is a time of global crisis – not just a health crisis but also economic, political, geopolitical and social crisis. Every government, local church and religious congregation searches for ways to respond to this crisis according to the local context. This crisis cannot be faced just by one or two organizations; a collective effort to find suitable responses would be a way forward. Pope Francis is proposing for the world some of the norms that we could follow during this pandemic and he has taken steps through the dicasteries. In this context, what does it mean to love our neighbors and enemies? What does it mean to our congregations/dioceses in Africa?

In this article, we reflect on the mission in the Africa continent in the light these two concerns: sexual abuse in the church and the pandemic. It may seem like a strange combination to reflect, but we reflect on the contextual issues to

respond to the meaning of loving our neighbor with all our heart, all our mind, all our soul and all our strength (Mt 12:30).

1. Understanding the Context

1.1. Trajectory of Sexual Abuses in the Church

Prof. Hannah Suchocka – one of the organizers of the Warsaw safeguarding conference in 2021, a former Prime Minister of Poland and former Polish Ambassador to the Holy See – said: "Clerical sexual abuse [is] a universal problem, not only a Western one."¹ This is found everywhere; only a few places the truth is known and other places it is not known.

Around 330,000 children have been sexually abused by members of the French Catholic church since 1950, including 216,000 by priests and clergy. In its report, the France's Catholic Church Commission concluded that there have been at least 2,900 to 3,200 perpetrators of child sexual assault among clergy members – an estimate based on demographic and archival analysis. 80 percentage of victims were boys, hailing from a wide variety of social backgrounds.

In the USA, canon lawyer Thomas Doyle, who coauthored a confidential memo to the US Catholic Conference of Bishops, estimates that the crisis implicates some 15,000 priests in 2013. The majority of accused priests in the United States (55.7%) had one formal allegation of abuse made against them, 26.4% had two or three allegations, 17.8% had four to nine allegations, and 3.5% had ten or more allegations." A major aggravating factor was the actions of Catholic bishops to keep these crimes secret.

In 2018, Chile witnessed 158 bishops, lay people and priests suspected of sexual abuse of

¹ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2021-09/hannah-suchocka-poland-warsaw-safeguarding-conference-abuse.html>

266 victims, including 178 minors.

“In Africa, the sexual abuse issue in the society as well as in the church exists and will remain so for a long time,” says Paul Samangassou, former director of Caritas Cameroon. “Some people know that child abuse exists, but nobody talks about it because there is too much respect for the clergy, or even fear.” And one said, “It is better to be on their side because they have strong power among the population.”² Exceptionally, however, in October 2019 proceedings for child abuse were launched in Bangui, Central African Republic, against the Belgian priest Luk Delft.

Anglophone African countries have better record. According to Stéphane Joulain, “in Anglo-Saxon law there is no statute of limitations on such crimes. In Zambia, for example, Children Acts already existed and were renewed after independence. Countries such as Kenya and South Africa addressed sexual abuse in schools at an early stage.”³ However, there are few legal proceedings. In South Africa, there have been 37 known cases of sexual abuse by Catholic priests since 2003, of which only seven have been investigated by the police, according to French newspaper *La Croix*.

Sr. Maura O'Donohue wrote a confidential report in 1994 on HIV/AIDS in Africa and exposed the women religious in Africa who were sexually abused. This stirred a lot of discussion in 2001 when it became public.⁴ No one will deny that it does not exist today, but it is hard to know the real data.

Continual headlines with new revelations contribute to the impression that much sexual abuse is still hidden. There remain priests and bishops who have committed or were complicit in abuse who have not met with accountability. Additionally, adult victims of sexual abuse in the context of seminaries, religious orders, parishes, and other ministries have increasingly expressed a need for healing of their wounds that have been largely unaddressed. In the aggregate, the church has suffered the loss of membership, credibility, and the ability to carry out effective evangelization. The perception is

widespread that the church's response to abuse has been reactive, piecemeal, and narrowly legal.⁵

Inability to identify power differences in the church is dangerous. When pastors have difficulty acknowledging their power, they stand in greater danger of abusing it. As Carolyn Shrock-Shenk explains, “Power is ambiguous, slippery and intoxicating and will control me if I am not conscious of its role in my life. I cannot control or manage something I deny having.”⁶

Other than the sexual abuses in the church, there are widespread cases in other sectors, especially among the relatives and the United Nations Peacekeeping forces in Africa. Many documents and reports have been produced, but the basic question remains: what happens to the victims?

Causes of sexual abuses in African church are many: personality disorders, clericalism, lack of due screening of the candidates, not good formation, alcohol abuse and substance abuse, transfer of clerics and lack of transparency, the sexual revolution and changing norms in society, media and internet effects regarding sex, difficulties of keeping the vow of chastity, homosexual tendencies, cultural patterns of relationship, power over the others, lack of respect for children and women, and so forth.⁷ It is difficult to single out any one cause, due to many reasons, of this existing problem today.

Sexual abuse is often related to financial abuse and spiritual abuse. In reality, though not a must, all three abuses are interrelated, thus when one deals with sexual abuse, one needs to look into other two abuses too.

1.2. Africa and COVID-19

Governments across Africa have stepped up measures to stem the spread of COVID-19. Disease surveillance and testing are being ramped up as the virus spreads beyond capital cities to provinces and regions. WHO has called on countries in Africa to decentralize and bolster subnational emergency response to

² <https://www.justiceinfo.net/en/45133-sexual-abuse-church-map-justice-worldwide.html>

³ Ibid.

⁴ http://web.peacelink.it/africanscribe/2_issue/p1.html

⁵ <https://christianscholars.com/truth-and-healing-in-the-church-after-sex-abuse/>

⁶ Shrock-Shenk, Carolyn, “‘Fessing Up’ to Power,” Mennonite Central Committee, A Common Place, September 1999.

⁷ Jerry J. Paresa, *The Catholic Sexual Abuse Scandal*, Torrazza Piemonte: Fides et Spes Press, 2021, 10, 31-48.

tackle the virus. The world leaders feared that Africa is going to be a watershed of destruction and death due to lack of infrastructure, but people have faced the virus more gracefully to keep the ill effects to the minimum. Thanks to the resilience and natural protection that they have, although in some countries, they closed the churches.

While many African governments have taken stringent measures to slow the spread of the highly contagious coronavirus that causes COVID-19, including school closures, travel bans, social distancing mandates, and contact tracing, but not many leaders agree with banning one kind of public assembly: faith-based gatherings.

“We encourage and support the efforts of the faith communities in the fight against coronavirus,” said Dr. Rudi Eggers, WHO representative in Kenya. “We work with their leaders because they are major stakeholders with credible links and influence among communities.” Some leaders have aligned their policies with medical experts’ advice to practice physical distancing to slow the spread of the virus and have agreed to postpone religious gatherings including closing or restricting the gatherings in the churches. But others have invoked religious ideology to confront the virus, assuring followers and devotees that faith offers adequate protection.

Jan Olbrycht, Member of European Parliament (MEP) and György Hölvényi MEP, both Co-Chairmen of the EPP Working Group on Intercultural and Religious Dialogue hosted a webinar with African church leaders entitled “Fighting the effects of COVID in the developing world - the role of religious communities.” Hölvényi explained, “If Africa is left alone in this struggle, the grave situation of the African people may not be managed any longer, a phenomenon which will directly affect Europe.”⁸ Olbrycht highlighted that development aid should allow for a prompt response to the Coronavirus crisis. He also underlined that special attention and financial help have to be dedicated to supporting health systems and caregiving for the elderly. Hölvényi also said, “Churches and religious communities have a special role to play in supporting African

governments and international organizations to respond to the crisis. However, without understanding the local and regional approaches in Africa, Europe will hardly be able to provide any effective assistance to African countries.”⁹

Some leaders of the Pentecostal churches and the Independent churches have other notions of virus and these voices confuse the people – for example: Nigeria, ‘No virus can come near your dwelling’; Tanzania, ‘True healing at church’; Ethiopia, ‘I saw the virus completely burned into ashes’; etc.

The reality is people suffer, the poor are neglected, vaccinations have dried up, people don’t have resources when infected and so forth. At the same time other injustices occur: some governments have become more authoritarian, gender discrimination and nature abuses continue. People experience vulnerability, but some churches and groups have shown resilience and have responded to this vulnerability showing solidarity.

1.3. Other Realities

To understand our wholistic mission, it is important to be aware of other important realities in Africa.

- Islam is growing faster in Africa than Christianity. By 2050, African Muslims south of the Sahara are expected to increase from 30% to 35% of Africa’s population;
- In 1970, Pentecostals represented less than 5% of all Africans. They now stand at 12%, a significant shift. In Mozambique alone, Pentecostals are the second largest Christian community;
- Independent African churches grow fast and they have greater influence among the people;
- Prosperity gospel and prosperity preachers in Africa are increasing constantly;
- The governments in the continent are more becoming unstable, more coups and other military regimes gaining ground;

The fundamentalism is growing and has caused a lot of deaths and destruction. In 2021, 11 missionaries lost their lives in Africa (in the world 22 died): 7 priests, 2 religious’ sisters, and 2 lay persons.

⁸ <https://www.eppgroup.eu/newsroom/news/covid-in-africa-churches-play-special-role-in-crisis>

⁹ Ibid.

2. Mission Orientation

Mission of the church is to participate in God's mission and to continue to actualize the Reign of God that Jesus brought forth. In service to this Reign, the church finds its identity (EN 14). Here, the church is called to announce, serve and witness to the reign of God (EG 20). According to the signs of the time and the context, the importance of this service and witness to the Reign become more demanding and gains prominence. The service and witness themselves become an authentic proclamation.

God is love giving everything.¹⁰ We must refrain from any talk or association of the pandemic with any image of divine punishment. Rather, as God revealed to Jonah, God is suffering with humanity in this moment of corona pandemic. God is never alone; God never acts alone. God's nature is to be a partner; Trinity reveals this partnership. When God creates, what is created becomes a partner, invited to freely participate in God's continuously creating work. God's love is revealed in the world through the Word made flesh, Jesus of Nazareth, who is anointed by the Spirit at his baptism (Lk 4:18).

The story of the woman who was suffering hemorrhage (Lk 8:43-48) and the healing of the Lepers (Mt 8:1-4; Luke 17:14) in the New Testament clearly show that there was stigma associated with these sicknesses.¹¹ By healing them, Jesus destroys the stigma that was associated with touching such people. In the case of COVID-19, one may not touch physically but one can reach out to them in some form, with prayers, comfortable words or helping them with material and financial help depending on the context. The Good Samaritan story manifests his love by picking up the wounded man, dressing his wounds with oil and making sure that he would be nursed back to health in the inn. The substance of love is manifested in healing. The church has a responsibility to fight stigmatization of all

infected and affected and show profound love towards them. The society at large will follow.

Miracles, in general, and healings, in particular, are in fact polyvalent signs; they point in several directions. The various values of the miracles are the power of God, the agape of God, the messianic Reign, the divine mission, the glory of Christ, the Trinitarian mystery, the sacramental economy, and the transformation of the passing world. The miracles and healings of Jesus are indications of the proclamation of the coming of God's Reign, and also the identity of Jesus and the inauguration of the Reign of God. Jesus expressed this in his vision statement in Luke 4:18-19. During this pandemic, the people in Africa are weak and on the margins of the society facing isolation and quarantine, gender-based violence because of the social and economic lock down, being bruised and broken hearted because of infection and the loss of loved ones due to the pandemic. The church has a role to play to nurture and minister healing to such people following the ministry of Jesus.

The church is called to embrace the afflicted with a cosmic compassion that reveals the face of Jesus who fed the hungry in thousands (cf. Lk 9:12-17) and gave speech to the dumb and sight to the blind (cf. Lk 7:21-22). These actions manifest Jesus' mission to promote God's rule in the world. The Gospel impels us to take sides with the poor and challenges us to follow Jesus in his self-emptying love and solidarity with the victims of history."¹²

Jesus revealed God's love through his healing, consoling presence and giving joy to the people. This was through his life, preaching and witnessing, that people experienced that love and felt close to Jesus and God. We are reminded that faithful witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ over everything and everyone (Eph 1:9,10) is borne out principally through indigenous witness; the pandemic is an occasion to show this witness.

The pandemic, impact of climate change, and heightened awareness of racial injustice are powerful reminders of the brokenness of our world and the iniquitous inequalities and injustices that define countless lives globally. We are reminded that God's mission is more than simply the rescue of lost souls from a

¹⁰ Steve Bevans, "Love Gives Everything! The Trinity as Ground of Mission, Interculturality, Inculturation, and JPIC," presented at SVD Generalate on 15 January 2022.

¹¹ Chamburuka, P. M., *Jesus Ethics in the Context of COVID-19: Lessons for the Zimbabwean Church*, unpublished paper, delivered to Pastors under ZCC 12 May 2020, 7.

¹² *Conclusions of the Research Seminar* on "Healing as Mission," Ishvani Kendra, Pune, January, 2001, no.10.

disintegrating planet but the renewal of all things (Rev 21:5) and healing of brokenness and alienation of all things in heaven and earth (Col 1:20).¹³ God needs our partnership in healing the world. Faith is a commitment to God and human beings, then, in the African context, a commitment to the process of liberation is vital. The participation in the process of establishing human dignity is a compassionate way of being in the world. Pope Francis, reflecting on the gospel passage, Mark 4:35-41, gives his pertinent thought on these words, “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?”. He reflects these words in the context of pandemic, “The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities. The tempest lays bare all our prepackaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes our people’s souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly ‘save’ us, ...”¹⁴

Salvation involves liberation from sin, whether individual or structural, and this enters into societal transformation, economic equality and rights, and the political freedom and overarching of human dignity and rights in a community or region. Salvation is both individual and communitarian; all are called to participate in “a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace,” as the Preface for the Feast of Christ the King so beautifully expresses it. When reflecting on the pandemic during Easter 2020, Pope Francis said, “Indifference, self-centeredness, division and forgetfulness are not words we want to hear at this time... They seem to prevail when fear and death overwhelm us, that is, when we do not let the Lord Jesus triumph in our hearts and lives.”¹⁵ With risen Jesus, we march forward giving hope; this is the message that people need today – hope.

Thus, our mission is integral; we respond to the context. The effective response depends on how well we are organized, motivated and committed to bring this love of God realistically.

2.1. Naming Jesus as the Sexual Victim

The #MeToo hashtag and campaign raises important questions for Christian public theology. In 2017, a church sign at Gustavus Adolphus Church in New York City connected Jesus with #MeToo through Jesus’ words, ‘You did this to me too’ (Mt 25:40). This church sign offers appropriate recognition of the theological solidarity of Jesus with #MeToo at a metaphorical level, some authors point out that this is more than that.

How do we understand the crucifixion of Jesus? An understanding of crucifixion as a form of sexual abuse has started to be more widely recognized in recent publications. Whether crucifixion is viewed from the perspectives of torture, lynching, or sexual abuse, it is how one interprets. The sexual element in crucifixion in terms of being stripped off and abuse of his body focus on this abuse crisis. Exploring what is easily ignored or unseen and uncovering what may be concealed or hidden within the crucifixion story, can make a profound contribution to church and society attitudes toward victims of sexual violence today. For some, it is hard to interpret that the crucifixion of Jesus is considered as a victim of sexual abuse; he was stripped naked and publicly he was shamed.

Jesus’ experience of sexual abuse carries extraordinary potential for significant change within the churches on how sexual violence might be seen and how the needs of survivors should be addressed. The naming of Jesus as a victim challenges churches to rethink misplaced attitudes that contribute to blaming, stigmatization, and shaming. It helps the churches to see that these negative responses are present, even when they are initially denied, and it can help to show why this must change. The issues highlighted by #MeToo, #Church Too, #SilenceIsNotSpiritual, and church sexual abuse scandals thereby offer a belated opportunity for

¹³ Paul Bendor-Samuel, “Covid-19, Trends in Global Mission, and Participation in Faithful Witness,” *Transformation*, Vol. 37/4 (2020): 261.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, *Life After the Pandemic*, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020, 18-19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

transformative renewal within theology, and within the church.¹⁶

3. Pathways of Mission

The context of sexual abuses and the struggles of the society during this pandemic have connectivity. It is pointed out during the pandemic, more sexual abuses, harassment of women have happened. More racial abuses and ill treatment of children are highlighted. What is the mission of the church or of our Society? It is difficult to give common pointers of our mission for both issues; thus, I prefer to give a few orientations separately for these issues.

3.1. In Dealing with the Sexual Abuses...

3.1.1. Speaking Truth to the Power

What is needed is a response that is proactive, holistic, and restorative. Arguably, such a response begins with telling the full truth about clerical abuse. The former Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, who said in an interview in 2021 that for the church to retain a credible voice in matters of justice, the truth about clerical sexual abuse “must come to light.” Pope Francis has made this point even more clearly many times: “I encourage you to listen to the cry of the victims.”

Establishing Truth Commission can help the victims to reveal the truth. Where hierarchy or high distance power structures, this Commission can mediate for the people. First, a full revelation of the truth by a Commission – forensic truth – can enjoy legitimacy, can create confidence among the victims. Secondly, it can contribute to the restoration of victims. Thirdly, revealing the truth can have a “multiplier effect” in begetting further restorative practices, including repentance, reparations, accountability, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

One sex abuse survivor said: "Please do not allow those wounds to be even deeper and new ones to occur", she says. "If we want to live the truth, we cannot close our eyes!", she said. The whole question is speaking the truth and it is said to the people in power. Unless there is a

proper forum, atmosphere, trust and tangible result, the victims will not come out to speak the truth to the people in power.

Here, in every diocese, there has to be a mechanism that if a bishop, provincial, any superior, priest or religious is accused, there has to be a proper channel to report. This channel has to be known to everyone. Confidentiality, self-belief and trust in the church have to be in place; otherwise one cannot listen to the truth or will not come to narrate the truth.

3.1.2. Pastoral Conversion: Pope Francis

From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has called for pastoral conversion in the church. Conversion at both the personal and institutional level is at the heart of the process of renewal and is essential to what Pope Francis calls a “missionary transformation” of the church.¹⁷

Pastoral conversion is important for us as we focus our efforts on renewing the church in the face of sexual abuse.¹⁸ We must work for change that will be incorporated in all aspects of the church’s life, combatting sexual abuse wherever it has occurred, regardless of the status or office of the person accused of committing the crime.

Listening: When someone who has been abused by clergy, religious or other persons in the church tells their story, we must receive them and listen to their testimony with the utmost reverence. There need to be clear channels of communication and encounter by which survivors can contact the church if they wish to. Within a particular culture, it may not be easy, but it is the duty of the church to make suitable channels to listen to them confidentially.

Acknowledging the wrongdoing: Listening leads to acknowledging the wrong done and the suffering inflicted. Pastoral conversion requires turning away from an inappropriate defensiveness that can be very harmful and hurtful, and embracing a deep listening to the survivor, with a willingness to understand more fully what they have experienced. Pope Francis says that this acknowledgement makes us

¹⁶ Jayme R. Reaves and David Tombs “#MeToo Jesus: Naming Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse,” https://brill.com/view/journals/ijpt/13/4/article-p387_2.xml?language=en

¹⁷ The SVD 18th General Chapter talks of transforming missionary disciples, 2018 GC, no.13.

¹⁸ <https://www.tutelaminorum.org/cardinal-omalley-sexual-abuse-crisis-requires-a-pastoral-conversion/>

vulnerable, but this can be moment of grace, a moment of kenosis, an experience of God's action in our world that brings healing by shining a light on a place of darkness so that all people can live more freely as disciples and believers.

Seeking forgiveness: Providing survivors with a sincere apology is important. However, "seeking pardon" requires more than issuing a statement or holding a meeting. Rather, it is a process that is rarely achieved in one moment and sometimes may not be achieved at all. For clergy and religious, the process of pastoral conversion is aided by our seeking pardon from all those impacted by sexual abuse. Clearly, this is not an easy path to walk, but we must walk, together with victims.

Highlighting that Jesus's first priority was healing before announcing the Gospel, Cardinal Seán Patrick O'Malley said the church needs a pastoral conversion among priests and bishops that involves bringing healing and listening so that people who have been hurt may be able to return to the church. "People are not going to believe the Gospel if they think we do not care about their children, if they think we are going to allow pedophile priests to be transferred from one place to another, endangering children," Cardinal O'Malley said.¹⁹

3.1.3. Creating a Culture of Safety

Cultural analysis can throw a lot of light on this issue of sexual abuse. Each country needs serious introspection on the cultural traditions, rituals, customs practices and cultural myths in relation to young girls and children. This analysis done with experts as well as with local leaders in the light of the gospel values can throw light on the respect for children, women, leaders and those who are in power. Hidden myths and oppressing rituals and customs in relation to sex can unearth what can be changed in the church.

The power of the clergy in Africa²⁰ is strong and it can lead to subdue others. The culture of reporting harassment is another way to come

¹⁹ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2021-09/cardinal-omalley-warsaw-safeguarding-pope-francis-conversion.html>

²⁰ It is not only in Africa but also in other continents, specially where there are hierarchical structures which are very dominant.

out openly to seek justice. Many find it difficult to report; thus, there is a need to create an atmosphere to report. The other churches too experience the same problem. Elizabeth Durant of Portland said, "There are barriers to being able to talk openly about what we experience: fear of sanction, scrutiny, no clear process but fitness review, worry about reputation, and more."²¹

Creating a culture of prevention is another concern. Hans Zollner, SJ from the Pontifical Gregorian University says that safeguarding networks are essential in building a culture of prevention. One finds strength and support in working collaboratively but must always remember that one does this to protect the vulnerable. Caring for victims/survivors needs the cooperation of all the community of the church. Without real cooperation, we will struggle with the situation and some people will remain silent.

Each diocese/province must evolve a policy to safeguard the vulnerable persons from abuses. Formation houses should study and discuss this policy; members of the diocese/province should be aware of this policy and follow it to show genuine love for the people and the church. The leaders have great responsibility to make sure that this policy is followed in the diocese/province. One caution is that any delay in dealing with any abuse case would create more harm and would be more difficult to deal with.

3.1.4. Prophetic Role of the Church

Prophets in the Bible arose when the poor were oppressed, injustice was widespread by the authorities and there were more pleasure, money and power. Amos cried out, "let justice flow like water." (5:24) Today, to be a church is to be prophetic. Prophets are friends of God and they speak on God's behalf, announcing good news and denouncing evils; they are symbol of the society and servants to the people bringing peace. Prophets are menace to society; a comfortable society does not want them because prophets disturb people, dispelling darkness and bringing light to society. Archbishop Thomas Menamparambil said, "prophets are lived parables." Their life speaks, inspires and

²¹ <https://www.ucc.org/proposed-synod-action-would-confess-church-too-inequality-abuse/>

challenges others. They seek conversion of the people, protest evil deeds, sow dissent, and more importantly indicate a change or show an alternative way of life. They inaugurate a new path, a new movement and a new society. Today, the church needs such prophets to protest the evil and to show an alternative way of life.

The following are characteristics of prophets: able to express themselves, able to take note of situations quickly, alertness to dishonesty, desire for justice, openness about personal faults, wholehearted involvement, loyalty to truth, willingness to suffer for right cause and persuasive in defining truth.²² These are not exhaustive, but indicating a future where we, the religious, have to assume the prophetic nature in our missions. My own conviction is that if there are no prophets in a diocese or a province, there may not be much change or progress. Renewal and transformation may be hard to come by. Prophetic figures challenge the internal organization and show the path of true mission. Do we have prophetic figures in our dioceses/provinces? Or do we follow the prophetic paths to show alternative to the society where justice, equality, fellowship, fraternity, peace and joy would dwell.

Prophetic Compassion

Love for the victims of sexual abuse and love for the afflicted leads to liberation of these people. Christianity is seen as a religion which is compassionate to the suffering and afflicted, but liberation of them from the perspective of social and ecclesial sphere would mean more than just loving talk and caring service. Love would imply more than the niceties of relationship. Love in the fuller sense would lead to embracing all the spheres of society. Christian love can have far reaching consequences of social and ecclesial implications; it calls for effective orientation, **prophetic compassion**. This whole implication is also called “**culture of prophetic love.**”²³ The prophetic sense of mission is an urgent need, an emergence of prophetic church in the

need of the time. One or two individuals can make a difference in a particular place, reaching out to the afflicted; but when the local church as a whole could have this culture of prophetic love or prophetic compassion, then the liberation of all the victims can be addressed. This is a process: showing compassion to them, creating a culture of compassion, discussing this concern of sexual abuse in an open manner, and showing love to the victims. This will not take place in a short span of time, but the whole culture of the people or the local church emerge with this sense of urgency to deal with the abuser and the abused. Here, church leadership must play a vital role in showing prophetic compassion. The authenticity of the church will be seen to the extent that justice is established and good relationship is restored. False claims are thoroughly dealt with.

Compassion leads to healing. Healing the persons who abused others is very different from that of the victim. In order for healing for both offenders and victims to take place, perpetrators must be held accountable and truly repent of what they have done.

Repentance involves much more than remorse or feeling bad. It involves acknowledging the full extent of one's actions, deeply feeling the effects of these actions, confessing, experiencing consequences and taking full responsibility for both the actions and the effects. We talked about pastoral conversion earlier. Further, it involves making some form of restitution or paying back what was taken away from the victim so that she/he may live in peace. This requires professional counseling and accountability. This process takes years of concentrated effort. Monitoring of the perpetrator is key. A perpetrator's healing is neither simple nor quick. When thinking about healing for perpetrators, it is important to take into account their motivation, background and psychological makeup; this will affect how long rehabilitation would take if it is likely to occur.

Marie Fortune describes that perpetrators fit on a continuum between two categories: wanderers and predators. The wanderer “wanders” across boundaries while the predator is sociopathic, lacking conscience and preying upon the victims. Wanderers and predators have different prognoses regarding the effectiveness of treatment. The prognosis for wanderers is fair to

²² <https://iblp.org/questions/what-are-common-characteristics-prophets>

²³ Wilfred, Felix, *On the Banks of Ganges: Doing Contextuaml theology*, New Delhi: ISPCK, 2002, 245-247.

good if they are highly motivated to change. Predators have a poor to fair prognosis even if highly motivated. It is important to have an assessment completed by an unbiased expert, trained to work with those who sexually abuse, before recommending a course of therapeutic rehabilitation.²⁴

Prophetic Diakonia

Christian commitment to justice and peace for today's victims calls for prophetic diakonia. The real service to the suffering masses would be in how we involve ourselves with restoring justice and peace in society. Going beyond charity syndrome is a must. Giving compensation to the victims is only a minimum act. In today's context, the transformative justice to the victims calls for undertaking deliberative, consistent and constant action against the abusers. The challenge of the church is to be proactive and interactive in society. The silence and the neutral position of the church in personal and structural violence is betrayal of Jesus.

Prophets of Human Beings

The victims and the abusers are humans. Treat them as human beings; everyone can come to normal situation with forgiveness and observing the path of justice. Here, there is no favoritism, but be open to the people. In the recent years, church leaders have failed, wound is being inflicted and pain is surmounting, and we need to find a path to remedy them. While treating everyone as human, prophetic sense of announcing the good news would require that justice be served, denouncing the evil of abuse be paramount, and an alternative path to restore peace be sought. Homosexuality in the politics has caused much problem in Africa than addressing the issue in the society. There are several courageous Christian leaders in Africa, most famously Desmond Tutu in South Africa, but also Bishop Christopher Senyonjo from Uganda, and pastors from various denominational backgrounds, who provide pastoral support to LGBTQ people and address homophobia from a Christian perspective. It is a complex issue to address it in public, but the LGBTQ people are human beings and their

orientation is different. When these things are not properly addressed or discussed in the public, priests and religious do not know how to deal with these issues. If these are not addressed properly, it leads into abuse, specially targeting young boys. In Western countries, it is acknowledged that homosexuality among priests leads to abuses of minors.

Cardinal Marc Ouellet blames a gay subculture among the clergy for the corruption of the church, noting: "These homosexual networks ... act under the concealment of secrecy and lies with the power of octopus tentacles, and strangle innocent victims and priestly vocations, and are strangling the entire Church."²⁵ Prophetic orientation, bold discussions and decisions are helpful to be humans and to respect others as human beings.²⁶

3.2. In Responding to the Pandemic...

Let us draw some liberative paths that may be helpful in the context of pandemic. Each diocese/province may deal with this concern according to the regulations of the local government and the diocese and the existential situation of the people.

3.2.1. Compassionate Evangelism

The local churches and religious congregations immediately swung into action on how to respond to the reality of lockdown of the churches. The core activities of celebration of Eucharist, saying rosaries and novenas and other prayers were stopped, but the churches started using available media technology, livestreaming the Eucharist celebration. Thus, the living rooms became "churches" and the people were happy. Along with that, many other spiritual activities like "Reciting Rosary", "Prayer session", etc., also were livestreamed. Although this has fulfilled to some extent the

²⁴ Fortune, Marie M. *Responding to Clergy Misconduct: A Handbook*, Faith Trust Institute, 2009, 97–98.

²⁵ https://origins.osu.edu/article/catholic-church-sexual-abuse-pope-confession-priests-nuns?language_content-entity=en. The 2018 study by Paul Sullins for The Ruth Institute, *Is Catholic clergy abuse related homosexual priests?* offers incontrovertible evidence that the root problem is homosexuality in the priesthood and episcopacy. But many do not agree that this is the problem, in fact, there are many problems to this sexual abuse issue. See Michael D. O'Brien, "The Scandals and the Shepherds," in *Abuse of Sexuality in the Catholic Church* by Gabriele Kuby and others, Torrazza Piemonte: Divine Providence Press, 2018, 107.

²⁶ See Paresa, *The Catholic Sexual Abuse Scandal*, 75-96.

spiritual aspect of the people, this has also rendered more to ritualism and clericalism. Spirituality is reduced to ritualism and we have failed to promote other forms of spirituality.

In the light of suffering, the Good news must be presented in compassionate way. Compassion means *to suffer together*. It is the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering. Compassion is not the same as empathy or altruism, though the concepts are related. Compassion is not sweet talk or empty words through electronic devices. The personal relationship or encounter and reaching out to them and sharing the message of the Good news personally have profound effect. During the pandemic, it is a challenge; but showing concern and consoling others, and bring the love of God in a personal way by the pastors and community is very important.²⁷

3.2.2. Solidarity in Action

Pope Francis has emphasized that what we need more during this pandemic is solidarity; he exhorts to show solidarity with others, especially those who suffer. He calls the world to be together to fight this crisis. Churches have issued instructions and pastoral letters calling for solidarity. The Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* says that the coronavirus pandemic “erupted, exposing our false securities.” It further says, “Aside from the different ways that various countries responded to the crisis, their inability to work together became quite evident. For all our hyper-connectivity, we witnessed a fragmentation that made it more difficult to resolve problems that affect us all” (FT 7). Therefore, fraternity and social friendship of all nations and leaders to find solution to the problem is the proper way ahead. In fact, the narrow nationalism and protecting one’s own boundary, tribe, race and family are blocking the vision of whole humanity. Concrete solidarity and communion are necessary to help others; some pathways of solidarity are gathering other NGOs to reach out to the affected, collaborating with the ecumenical groups and working with the people of other religions. Cardinal Philippe Ouédraogo of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, said “Genuine

brotherhood (sisterhood) is an appropriate response to the challenges posed by Covid-19.”²⁸

Some governments have used this occasion to cement their authoritarian rule or to impose their political agenda. In some countries, the poor were left by themselves to find remedies. The human rights of the marginalized and poor were violated. The psychological impact due to the virus and other restrictions too are alarming. The elderly and children are most affected. Solidarity to remedy these situations is a huge challenge.

Selfishness, individualism, egoism and protecting one’s own family play a greater role, but soliciting the solidarity is our task. Many church organizations worked selflessly with traditional work. New initiatives and innovative methods of social action would have helped. The model of the church as described in Acts (2:42-46, 4:32-35) must be experienced once again. The sense of belonging, sharing and the spirit of stewardship must be inculcated, and the communitarian dimension is needed now. This is the antidote to isolation and individualism. We have done many things, but could we do more? What else can be done?

3.2.3. Work Against Injustice

We are aware that the prophetic nature includes working against injustice. The COVID-19 pandemic, the Pope said, exposed the world's physical, social and spiritual vulnerabilities and laid bare the great inequality that reigns in the world in all sectors. Injustices, Pope Francis warns, “are neither natural nor inevitable. They are the work of man (and woman), they come from a growth model detached from the deepest values.... For this reason, to emerge from the pandemic, we must find the cure not only for the coronavirus, which is important, but also for the great human and socioeconomic viruses.”²⁹ We are also reminded of Martin Luther King Jr.’s profound words – “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” The UN noted

²⁸ Africa welcomes the positive message of ‘Fratelli Tutti’ - SECAM, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/africa/news/-2020-10/africa-welcomes-the-positive-message-fratelli-tutti-secam.html>

²⁹ Pope during the audience on 30 September, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Pope:-do-not-return-to-a-normality-of-injustice-and-environmental-degradation-51171.html>

²⁷ Paul Bendor-Samuel, “Covid-19, Trends in Global Mission,” 261.

that embracing human rights as an integral part of our public health response will not only provide ethical guidance during these difficult times but will also set a process to seek justice.

The United Nations said, “Structural inequalities are exacerbated as the economic fallout of the crisis unfolds and legal problems related to detention, employment, housing, and debt are on the rise. Risks of violence against women and children have increased, especially as many of us are confined at home. As we move to address some of these unprecedented challenges, the crisis also presents an opportunity to rethink how to ensure access to justice for all.”³⁰ Stigmatization, discrimination, racism, injustice, and inequalities in the COVID-19 era are faced in all countries. Injustices existed earlier, but these have increased during this period, and the church cannot be a mute spectator to this, protecting our structures and interests. A prophetic voice is essential. This is how we can live our faith and our closeness to God and people. During the Easter celebration in 2020, Pope Francis called for solidarity of the world over to confront the “epochal challenge” posed by the coronavirus pandemic. This change needs to be confronted by the local churches and the unity of the people.

The World Council of Churches pointed out, “In its light we see anew and afresh the distorted realities and inequalities powerful interests have passed off as ‘normal’ and unquestionable... The human causes and systemic roots of this pandemic point to the exigency of systemic change if we are to be converted by the revelation COVID-19 is offering us.”³¹

The pandemic is unfolding the Pandora box of injustice. Our mission is to work for the kingdom of God. The values of the kingdom – justice, equality, fraternity, unity, peace and joy – have to be brought about through our ministries.

3.2.4. Sustainable Development

³⁰ “Facing down injustice in the age of a pandemic,” <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/blog/2020/facing-down-injustice-in-the-age-of-a-pandemic.html>

³¹ “As COVID-19 presents a prophetic moment, adopt an Economy of Life, urge global religious groups,” <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/as-covid-19-presents-a-prophetic-moment-adopt-an-economy-of-life-urge-global-religious-groups>

The floods, wildfires, pollution and destruction due to typhoons and hurricanes have had a less effective response due to the pandemic. The more we destroy nature, the more we face such problems. The pandemic situation has brought to light the ecological disaster that is unfolding now. Climate change is about to supercharge the coronavirus emergency. This calls for promoting integral ecology according to the spirit of *Laudato Si*. As a response to the ecological crisis, emphasis should be given to the reduction of carbon footprints. This involves participation in the greening movement, tree-planting, micro-gardening (family-community levels), adoption and promotion of alternative sources of energy (solar, wind), waste-management, biking, walking, etc. Besides reducing the pollution level, we should promote a healthy and simple lifestyle which can strengthen the immune system against diseases and viruses (plant-based diet, caloric restrictions, intermittent fasting).³²

Many climate researchers are optimistic in that this deadly pandemic has taught governments some critical lessons that they can apply to the problem of rising temperatures and environment. Nature has shown the evidence. The big challenge is to ensure the recovery has a green stimulus.

Climate change is ignored by some leaders. Some governments have programs only on paper. Some don't respect the agreements. A serious approach for sustainable development is ignored and more profit and self-growth programs are promoted. It affects both nature and human beings. We need to address this, taking climate change and governance seriously. A sustainable future is possible if governance changes.

We need a green stimulus that creates jobs and lifts up communities in ways that also slashes carbon pollution, increases resiliency, and develops a just, modern economy. This will help the whole world. Active participation has to start with us in our parishes, institutions and communities. Our ministry is prophetic action to counter the policies of the government that ignore climate change, to protest against the

³² Amado L. Picardal, CSSR, “Challenges for the Church and Religious in the Long Term.” This is an unpublished article, and this was presented to SVD general administration.

land grabbers preying on the indigenous people and poor, to promote a plastic-free environment, to plant trees, to create a clean environment so that various viruses do not multiply but one can live peacefully. According to Prof. Gail Whiteman from Lancaster University, UK, it was almost impossible to believe that governments around the world, when faced with a health emergency, would put humanity ahead of the economy. But they did.³³

3.2.5. Emphasizing Education

Educating the people is one of the paramount tasks of the church to share the process of liberation with them. In the context of the paradigm shifts in the theology and praxis, new strategies must be evolved and then, our education ministry becomes, a mission. *Education is mission* and we need to move ahead with this vision to give awareness, motivating them showing different paths to liberative action. “The search for fresh goal and commitment to renewed options will motivate us to seek answers for tomorrow’s problems with a stout heart, prophetic zeal and greater enthusiasm to participate fully in this sublime mission of the church. This new consciousness will enable us to situate our excellence in terms of our relevance to the needs of God’s Reign, rather than situating it in terms of an excellence irrelevant to most God’s people.”³⁴

The educational ministry is one of the opportunities to take the issues of injustice, discrimination of women, sexual abuses by the family, priests and religious. To educate people proactively and beyond mere information calls for effective cultural and social changes in dealing with sexual abuses as well as dealing with other inequalities that have arisen due to the pandemic. Creating opportunities, finding new ways and going beyond textbooks education is important today. Every school should have the motto, “Education for Transformation of Society.”³⁵ Conscientization of young people in this regard is urgent in our ministries. Educating catechists is another

challenge. They are not just for sacramental ministries but their training and involvement in overall mission of the church is very significant.

Conclusion

Grzegorz Strzelczyk from Poland said during the conference in 2021, “sexual abuse in the Church has deep theological implications,”³⁶ leaving many questions than answers. It is not just crisis, but criminal act when it comes to abuses of minors and vulnerable people. Sexual harassment and other issues relating to chastity need a deeper look at how the church maintains its sanctity and purity in spite of dark patches. The abuses by the church hierarchy or any person should not deter us to follow our Master and to observe our vows prophetically. Our mission is to heal the suffering, seek justice, prevent future abuse and restore trust and credibility within the ecclesial community.

The pandemic cannot be an excuse to fall prey to the weaknesses, but it is an occasion to be more alert to see the suffering. The face of Jesus is disfigured among the suffering; people are crucified due to the virus and the evil forces emerge during this lockdown and restrictions. Our mission is to be vigilant, compassionate and being prophetic. We are aware that many missionaries were infected and died of COVID-19; they are the modern-day martyrs. We have long involved in prophetic dialogue; this dialogue with victims of abuses and victims of the sick, victims of nature and vulnerable calls for listening with our heart and mind, finding solutions collectively and executing remedies. We don’t know the future, but we can create one.³⁷ The more creative and appropriate action would show how serious we are in these concerns. Lethargy, delay and inaction have no place. Transparency, accountability and concrete action are the call of the day.

³³ “Climate change and coronavirus,” <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-52485712>

³⁴ *Conclusions of the Research Seminar* on “Education as Mission,” Ishvani Kendra, Pune, 10-14 January 2004, 41.

³⁵ Thomas K.C., SVD, *Beyond COVID-19 Pandemic: Education for a Benign and Healthy World* (Rourkela, 2020), 50.

³⁶ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2021-09/warsaw-safeguarding-conference-day-three-survivors-suffering.html>

³⁷ See Steve Bevans, “Theological Reflection on the Contexts for Mission After COVID-19” *Verbum SVD*, Vol. 62/2-3 (2021): 354.

Chris Chaplin, MSC

Christmas Message

Recently I was out shopping. At the OVS store, a homeless man sat in the doorway looking at me with pleading eyes. The kind of look that could make you feel guilty for having any money in your pocket.

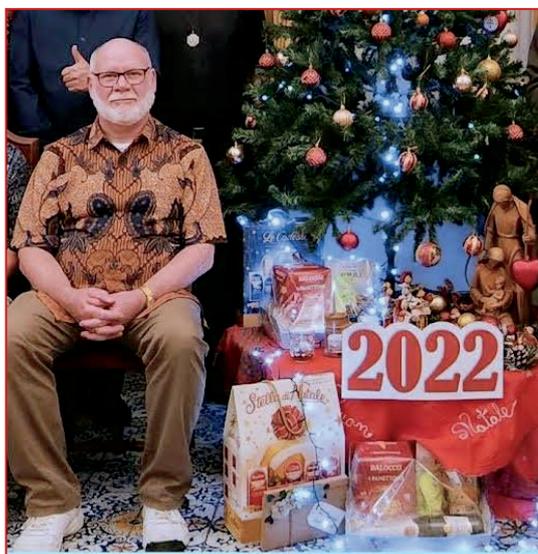
“What can I give him?”, I wondered. Well, I can’t give him my credit card. But I have some cash. In my mind I started dividing up the cash I had in my pocket. The temptation would always be to give him the loose change, rather than the bank notes.

What a gift that God doesn’t do this to us. We don’t get the left-overs. We get the lot. God gives everything; God’s total self in the Birth of Jesus. Christmas is a season for giving. It’s what brings us joy. There is so much more joy in giving, than in receiving.

Being a part of the SEDOS family is like that. We come to explore the world of Mission and to give what we can to enable that Mission of God’s love grow among us and throughout the world. We are not necessarily Missionaries by being in SEDOS, but we promote them. We are their resource people. We are a forum of religious belonging to Institutes of Consecrated Life who commit themselves to deepening their understanding of global mission. We dig deep into our pockets to encourage research and disseminate information through our SEDOS Bulletin, website, public conferences, workshops, and annual seminars.

This year I have not been able to be as involved as usual due to Congregational commitments, but I have witnessed much activity taking place. This year our new Executive Director has had to find his feet in his role and has worked hard to encourage our involvement. I take this opportunity to thank the Executive Director, Fr.

John Paul Herman, SVD, who has been on a huge learning curve and given not just the cash in his purse, but I suspect many times more. He has given the credit card also. Of course, we are all aware of the crew that supports his work, the SEDOS Secretary Sr. Celine and the Technology Assistant Sr. Christina, and we say thanks to them for their fine contribution, keeping us in contact and informed of what’s going on, as well as the many back-room tasks they attend to.



I am here speaking to you because two very busy Superiors General cannot do so. And how anyone could think of leading a religious congregation, As Well AS being President or Vice-President of an organisation like SEDOS at the same time is remarkable!! We take our hats off to them both, Sr. Mary Barron, of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles, President of the SEDOS Executive Committee, and

Vice-President, Fr. Alain Mayama, of the Spiritans. I wish to express everyone’s appreciation of their leadership, willingness, and generosity. Thank you.

Like any good team, I guess that leaders can only take on extra tasks like SEDOS, because they have good support. The SEDOS Executive Committee, Fr. André-Leon Simonart, Sr. Geni Santos Camargo, Fr. Renè Stockman, Sr. Anna Damas, Sr. Oyidu Okwori, and Sr. Maria Jerly the SEDOS Treasurer have each contributed to the work of SEDOS. We thank all of them for their involvement in the Church’s prophetic mission in the world.

SEDOS is not just an institution, it is people. People like you. It is people like you who open your purse to offer all you have so that those

begging at the doorways of mission can be nourished and supported.

When I arrived in Rome, I was told that I needed to learn three important Italian words. The first word was *pazienza*, the second word was *non-funziona*, and the third word was *Sciopero!!* Well, this Christmas party tonight, could have been derailed by the third of those words. However, your presence bears witness to that generosity and to your capacity to create joy and hospitality, showing that *non-funziona* cannot overcome you. And you have shown by

being here and giving all, you have that we have all learnt the importance of the first word – *pazienza*.

We thank all those who have had some part in preparing tonight's celebration. Particularly John Paul, Celine and Christy. At Christmas Time we give thanks to God for you all and we ask God to bless each of you serving the mission of God in the world with continuing generosity.

SEDOS Executive Committee - 2023

President	Sr. Mary Barron, OLA	Sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles
Vice President	Fr. Alain Mayama, CSSp	Congregation of the Holy Spirit (Spiritans)
Councillors	Fr. André-Leon Simonart, M.Afr	Missionaries of Africa
	Fr. Chris Chaplin, MSC	Missionaries of the Sacred Heart
	Fr. Renè Stockman, FC	Brothers of Charity
	Sr. Anna Damas, SSpS	Missionaries, Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit
	Sr. Geni Santos Camargo, SFB	Sisters of the Holy Family of Bordeaux
	Sr. Oyidu Okwori, SHCJ	Society of the Holy Child Jesus
Treasurer	Sr. Maria Jerly, SSpS	Missionaries, Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit

SEDOS Team

Executive Director	Fr. John Paul Herman, SVD	Society of the Divine Word
Secretary	Sr. Celine Kokkat, CJMJ	Congregation of Jesus Mary Joseph
Digital Assistant	Sr. Christina, CJMJ	Congregation of Jesus Mary Joseph
Translator	Ms. Philippa Wooldridge	



Photo from the SEDOS Christmas Party

John Paul Herman, SVD

SEDOS Annual Report 2022

SEDOS is a forum open to institutes of Consecrated Life which commit themselves to deepening their understanding of global mission. It encourages research and disseminates information through its Bulletin and website, public conferences, working groups and its Annual Residential Seminar. At present it has 83 congregations as members. This year the Congregation of the Missionary Franciscan Sisters of Immaculate Conception has opted out due to the shift of their Generalate from Rome and the Order of Friars Minor–Conventuals has asked for the suspension of its membership. At the same time there are two new members: The Society of Christian Doctrine (Women), and the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur who have re-joined.

1. Activities of SEDOS

In 2022, the first SEDOS event was the **Spring Session** held on 11 March 2022, on the theme, “Mission in Secular Europe Today.” The choice of the Speakers was made according to what their contribution would be to the theme and how it would benefit the members. More than 500 registered and 200 to 300 people participated on-line. The members were pleased as they considered the reflections relevant and illuminating. It was noted that the online participation was chosen due to pandemic. Although the familial atmosphere of the gatherings can still be felt online, this needs to be reinforced by holding these seminars in person too. Therefore, it was recommended that the coming events could be held in person as well as online.

The Residential Seminar on the theme, “Formation for Mission” was organised from 9-13 May 2022, in Ariccia. It was a very enriching experience for all the participants. They expressed that the Speakers were good as they spoke with a lot of energy and enthusiasm. The seminar made them realise that many sisters/brothers in the world are struggling for unity and a better relationship with people of

different beliefs. It was a good opportunity to interact with people working all over the world. The variety of the nations and the ministries of the sisters/brothers was astonishing. The environment of the Seminar was great. Nature, especially around the lake and the beautiful sunset/sunrise are unforgettable.

The Seventh Conference of International Association of Catholic Missiologists (IACM) on the theme, “**Thirty Years Since Redemptoris Missio**” was held from 22-24 June 2022, at the Pontifical Urbaniana University, Rome. The Director attended the Conference on behalf of SEDOS. SEDOS is a member of the Association.

SEDOS was also invited to participate in an online symposium, “**The Doors that Propaganda Fide has opened since 1622,**” co-organised by the Centre for Catholic Studies, the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Macau Ricci Institute from 24-26 August 2022.

The Autumn Seminar on the theme “Revisiting the Charism in Today’s Context” was held at the Collegio dei Verbiti, Rome, on 28 October 2022. Despite some technical difficulties due to holding a hybrid seminar, it was appreciated as it was relevant and thought-provoking and beneficial for the congregations to share and discuss how to meet the various challenges facing their mission work.

The long-awaited book, “**New Trends in Mission**” was also launched on 28 October 2022 by Mons. Camillus Johnpillai, Head of the office of the Dicastery for the Evangelisation of Peoples. The Publishers, ORBIS Books, Maryknoll, were generous enough to offer the book half price, so we could present one free copy to each member and to the authors. They also sent a few copies free of postage charges to some of the non-European countries. We thank them also for sending complementary copies the books connected with mission for our library.

A Workshop on “*Missio Dei*” was organised by Steyler Missions-wissenschaftliches Institut, Sankt Augustin, Germany, from 2-5 November 2022 in Siegburg, Germany. It was a follow up to the Symposium which SEDOS had organised.

1. Administration of SEDOS

The Administration of SEDOS continues its process of simplification. Much has been worked out by Fr. Peter Baekelmans, CICM, the former Director, Fr. Biju, SVD, the former Bursar and Sr. Celine, JMJ, the Secretary. The entry of the new Director, new Bursar and other new Executive Committee members was a rather easy transition as they were always ready to help in case of need. The editing and publication of the Bulletin is going on smoothly and the Website is proceeding well with some attempts to update it regularly and make it better. A new feature, “The Word for the Day” has recently been added to the *homepage* every day. Now, most of the registrations are online. The library is regularly updated with new publications, which are also displayed on the Website.

2. Finances

Three years ago, the Executive Committee decided to set a limit on the finances at the end of each Fiscal Year. This limit is 100,000 Euro. So far, the running expenses of the office amounted to about 50,000 Euro, and the total cost per year was about 70,000 Euro and the remainder, about 30,000 Euro was kept in reserve in case of need. Now after the pandemic, new situations such as the hybrid form of events (online as well as in person) have come into existence. Since prices have gone up, the cost of things and services has also increased. But overall, our financial situation is good and we hope to manage it well within our limits. This year from the total income of 90,272.94 Euro, we still have 237.94 as surplus. Due to new Customs regulations the incoming and outgoing postage and parcels are being charged heavily. We have to pay customs duties on every book from outside Europe even if it is free. So, we also had to pay extra Customs charges on the book, “New Trends in Mission”, imported from ORBIS.

The financial agreements for those working for SEDOS are in line with the requirements of the State. The religious working for SEDOS are paid by means of a donation to the respective Congregation, the cleaning lady presents a fiscal bill every three months, as do the translators from the last Autumn Seminar. They are paid 250 Euro for half day and 400 Euro for full day with taxes included. The English lady, Philippa, who has been working for SEDOS since September 1975 as translator, on a semi-volunteer basis, has requested SEDOS to extend her agreement. She does a great job in checking and translating some of the articles from other languages into English for publication on the website.

4. Basic Schedule of SEDOS in 2023

Spring Session 2023
Residential Seminar 2023
Autumn Seminar 2023

5. Conclusion

We know the online programs have become a necessary tool today as they foster wider global participation. But it has its limits. There is nothing better than meeting and encountering people in person. Thus, we encourage our Members to come in person to the events. For those who cannot attend for unavoidable reasons, we make the events available online so no one misses them. We are trying to improve the “hybrid” version: online and *in situ*.



(The book price is €40 for members only)

Farewell Words from the outgoing President

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, one behalf of SEDOS, I say to all of you, here present and those on-line, Good Afternoon, *buon pomeriggio, Bon après-midi, buenas tardes...* a very warm welcome to all of you who attended the Annual General Assembly.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, as you well know, SEDOS (Service of Documentation and Study on Global Mission) is composed of more than 80 missionary congregations and institutes of consecrated life and apostolic societies. The Members commit themselves to deepening their missional call and the concept of global mission in the context of our day. It encourages research and disseminates information through its Bulletin and Homepage, the Annual SEDOS Residential Seminar (beginning of May), public conferences, and workshops. At the last SEDOS Autumn Day of Reflection, we launched the latest work of SEDOS which updates the current research on “New Trends in Mission”, in the Church and the world of today. Pope Francis encourages us to continue to do this when he tells us in *Evangelli Gaudium*:

“I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in

pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself. As John Paul II once said to the Bishops of Oceania: “All renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion” (EG, n. 27).

On 28 October 2022 we launched the joint publication that was prepared in 2021, when we celebrated the 40th anniversary since SEDOS conducted an important SEMINAR on “The ‘Why’ of Mission.” We thank Fr. Peter Baekelmans, CICM, our former Director and Executive Secretary of SEDOS, who has been behind this book and Fr. Joh Paul Herman, SVD, and the staff of SEDOS for their concerted effort to present us with a useful tool to *Revisit the Charisms in Today’s Context*.

We are grateful to the member congregations, institutes and communities for your contribution to help SEDOS materially and also for sharing the personnel you have at the service of the mission in the various activities of the SEDOS. We once again renew our gratitude to the SVD Society for hosting the SEDOS office in their Generalate and at this time for having given us a confrere who now serves as the new SEDOS Director and Executive Secretary.

Today, as we see in the Agenda of the Annual General Assembly, we will confirm the members of the Executive Committee of SEDOS, and approve the Report and the Budget. This is in-line with the STATUTES of



SEDOS. We are grateful to all those who have made themselves available to serve on the Executive Committee.

We are also in communion with member congregation who are experiencing difficulty. We remain in communion with the Missionaries of Africa, White Fathers who lost here in Rome Cardinal Richard Baawobr, Former Superior General of the White Fathers, and active member of SEDOS. We are also united in communion of prayer with the congregations who have had a tragic loss of members of their Institute. I want to mention, the case of the killing of Sr. Maria de Coppi, Comboni Missionary Sister, killed in Mozambique, she is the latest of our martyrs.

Thank you for accepting our invitation to attend the Annual General Assembly which is the deliberative organ of SEDOS. On a personal note, as today in an official way I end my service in SEDOS where I have acted for many years as Vice-President and later President of SEDOS. I thank everybody, in a particular way, the members of the Executive Committee and the Staff of SEDOS for having made the service easier by working together and in a special way for having walked together - as SINODALITY continues to invite us to do. *GRAZIE*.



*“Where is the child who
has been born?” (Mt 2:2).
Where can we find
and encounter our Lord?*



Unto us
a
Savior
is
BORN

- Luke 2:11

