

## **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."<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> <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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.”<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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

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

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> [http://web.peacelink.it/africanscribe/2\\_issue/p1.html](http://web.peacelink.it/africanscribe/2_issue/p1.html)

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

<sup>6</sup> Schrock-Shenk, Carolyn, “‘Fessing Up’ to Power,” Mennonite Central Committee, A Common Place, September 1999.

<sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup>

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.

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

<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup>

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

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

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> *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).<sup>13</sup> 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, ...”<sup>14</sup>

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.”<sup>15</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 33.

transformative renewal within theology, and within the church.<sup>16</sup>

### 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.<sup>17</sup>

Pastoral conversion is important for us as we focus our efforts on renewing the church in the face of sexual abuse.<sup>18</sup> 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

<sup>16</sup> 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](https://brill.com/view/journals/ijpt/13/4/article-p387_2.xml?language=en)

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

<sup>18</sup> <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.<sup>19</sup>

### 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 Africa<sup>20</sup> is strong and it can lead to subdue others. The culture of reporting harassment is another way to come

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."<sup>21</sup>

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

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

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

<sup>21</sup> <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.<sup>22</sup> 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**.”<sup>23</sup> 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

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

<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

### **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."<sup>25</sup> Prophetic orientation, bold discussions and decisions are helpful to be humans and to respect others as human beings.<sup>26</sup>

### **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

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

<sup>25</sup> [https://origins.osu.edu/article/catholic-church-sexual-abuse-pope-confession-priests-nuns?language\\_content-entity=en](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.

<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup>

### 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.”<sup>28</sup>

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.”<sup>29</sup> We are also reminded of Martin Luther King Jr.'s profound words – “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” The UN noted

<sup>28</sup> 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>

<sup>29</sup> 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>

<sup>27</sup> 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.”<sup>30</sup> 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.”<sup>31</sup>

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

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<sup>30</sup> “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>

<sup>31</sup> “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).<sup>32</sup>

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

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<sup>32</sup> 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 generalate 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.<sup>33</sup>

### 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.”<sup>34</sup>

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.”<sup>35</sup> 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,”<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup> 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.

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

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

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

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

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