

# Bulletin 2024

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SEDOS



*Mission  
in the Peripheries*

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## ***SEDOS***

*(Service of Documentation and Study on Global Mission)  
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It encourages research and disseminates information  
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**Editor:** Fr. John Paul Herman, SVD  
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**Translations:** Ms. Philippa Wooldridge  
**Printing:** Tipografia DON BOSCO

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## *Editorial*



### **Dear Members and Readers,**

The theme of the January-February issue of the SEDOS Bulletin is, “Mission in the Peripheries.”

The theme suggests that mission is not simply for those on

the peripheries but is being and working together with them on a mission, a mission to bring/spread the “Joy of the Gospel.”

It is not just about reaching the peripheries in the sense of meeting the flock that is lost and trying to bring it back by proclaiming the Good News of hope, happiness and peace. It means going further by participating in and experiencing the difficulties people go through and achieving the mission together. The mission is not from the outside but of being together. The fulfilment is in God’s hands.

The peripheries include the poor, the sinners, the exploited, the homeless, the hopeless and many others. We missionaries are called to be like Jesus “who even ate with sinners and tax collectors.”

Pope Francis reminds us that the Church is commissioned to “go forth”, but the fact is that it “stands still.” A good shepherd should know the smell of the sheep. He takes stock of his flock by observing the weakest in its midst.

“We know that God works through the weakest”. And this is the mystery that Pope Francis is showing us. Like St. Francis he knows that God walks on the periphery.

In his Address to the Convocation of Catholic Leaders, which coincided with the Feast-day of St. Junípero Serra — the great Franciscan, the spiritual Father of America’s first evangelization, Most Reverend José H. Gomez, Archbishop of Los Angeles, said, “St. Junípero was an immigrant and a missionary, a Spaniard

who came to this land from Spain by way of Mexico. His witness reminds us — and we should never forget this — that the mission to America was a continental mission from the beginning. It was a mission to make all the peoples of the Americas, North and South, into one family — into a new world of faith.”

He recalled Pope Francis’ homily at the Canonisation of St. Junípero saying, “He is a model for a Church that adores and worships Jesus Christ — the Church that answers his call to follow him. To leave security and comfort behind and go forth to the ‘peripheries’ of human experience,” (Convocation of Catholic Leaders: The Joy of the Gospel in America, Orlando, Florida, 3 July 2017). The peripheries were the theme of the short speech that the then-Cardinal Bergoglio gave at the meetings before the Conclave in 2013. “The Church is called to come out of herself and to go to the peripheries, not only geographically, but also to the existential peripheries: the mystery of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance and indifference to religion, of intellectual currents, and of all misery.”

The peripheries, which are growing in the world today, are the new mission territory. We are reminded of our mission to the peripheries.

The sadness, the sorrow and all the suffering we see in our society is rooted in the loss of God, a loss of the transcendent sense of life. The answer is Jesus. The answer is conversion. We need to deepen our love of Christ and our commitment to His mission.

The final words that Jesus spoke to his disciples, he continues to speak to us today: “Go forth! Go out into all the world. Follow me and walk with me in the power of my Spirit. Bring all men and women to discover the love that you have found!”

The more we try to live like Jesus, the more we will be drawn to the peripheries, into serving others. The periphery is the place of encounter with Christ, and the place of mission.

René Stockman, FC, in his article, “Martyr or Crusader?” explains the two terms with regard to the faith. According to him the Martyrs, whose witness to Christ was non-violent, laid the foundation of the Church. Therefore, as Christians we retain the mission to proclaim the faith, by living radically and authentically ourselves according to the Gospel before anything else.

The article, “The Poor Embraced by God’s Plan for Justice and Compassion”, by Joseph Xavier, SJ, written in two parts, gives us the theological understanding of the option for the poor. We are called to care for the poor and marginalised in society. He says, “Jesus himself taught that helping the poor is a central aspect of following him. The early Christian communities were known for their practice of sharing their resources and caring for those in need. The Church continues to prioritise this concern even today.” According to him, the poor are not just objects of charity for the wealthy. He tries to re-examine the place of the poor in our contemporary Christian understanding.

The article, the “Involvement of Divine Word Missionaries in the Development of Health Services in Papua New Guinea” by Jerzy Kuzma, SVD, highlights the healing ministry of the Divine Word Missionaries in the peripheries of Papua New Guinea. The author writes, “The purpose of our missionary life is to bring fullness of life and God’s goodness to others, especially by caring for those in need. Since the beginning of the SVD mission in (Papua) New Guinea (PNG), serving the sick has been an integral part of the holistic approach to promote human development.”

In the article, “The Challenge of *Fratelli Tutti* to the Indian Context”, Jacob Kavunkal, SVD, reminds us that working for the mission in the peripheries is the mission of all humanity. Therefore, all must come together as *fratelli tutti*. According to him, “The vision of creating “a single human family” cannot be left to any one religion (FT, n. 8), but requires the cooperation of all, as fellow pilgrims.” Referring to the Indian context, he says, the “Church has to move away from any triumphalism and behaviour to become credible by cooperating with other religions as well as with the poor and marginalized and, thus, to decolonize the contours of its theology.”

The article, “Father Damien De Veuster (1840-1889), A Missionary in and of the Periphery”, by René Stockman, FC, gives us a concrete example of Father Damien’s life, who was a real missionary in peripheries. His missionary life among the peripheries is a witness for all of us. He lived as leper with the lepers enthusing new life into them.

In the last article, “Les Defis Missionnaires.... Dans Le Moments De Capitivité”, Enden, ICM, shares a real testimony of a missionary living in captivity. These days we come across many such incidents in various parts of the world where the missionaries are taken captives for the ransom of money as they are the easy targets. In spite of going through tremendous tortures and cruelty they find their solace in God, who protects and strengthens.

I am sure all these articles will inspire each one of us to become a courageous and daring missionary, who lives among peripheries and brings Good News to them.

Dr. John Paul Herman, SVD



## **Martyr or Crusader?**

All have been commissioned to spread the faith. It is Jesus himself who calls us to do so: “Go out into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (*Mk 16:15*). No believer can avoid this. Of course, there are different ways to engage in proclamation. And this will also differ according to the vocation one has received. Proclaiming the Gospel, for example, is explicitly part of the mission of a priest. Besides presiding in the celebration of the liturgy and performing ministry, he has the explicit mission of proclaiming the Gospel. But other believers will also contribute to this proclamation in their own way. For some, this will be participation in confirmation catechesis, while others will proclaim through their exemplary religious life and their service work within the Church. With Cardinal Newman, it resonates that we all need to shine, radiate, let the light of the Lord and His love shine in the world. “Let me preach You without preaching, not by words, but by my life and by the compelling power, the sympathetic influence of all I do.” Newman is not saying that we should not preach, for he himself was a great preacher, but that before anything else we should live and experience the gospel authentically, in a way in which it is attractive to others. It will be from this intense experience of the gospel that we will find the right words to effectively proclaim the gospel too.

There must be total congruence between what we say and the way we live. If not, we become a caricature of what we proclaim.

Is that not the problem why many proclaimers are not taken seriously, because the fine words they utter do not match their own way of life? In fact, every proclamation should be accompanied by a serious examination of conscience. Isn't that also what Jesus reproached the Pharisees and scribes for, that their beautiful words were anything but a reflection of their own way of life?

Until previously, the ‘conversion’ aspect was a regular feature and one of the objectives of proclamation. In the past, how many missionaries went out to convert entire peoples and bring the Good News to them? Today, this is met with pity and even reproach and accusation by some, because this would have meant showing too little or even no respect for one's own culture and the natural religions that these people usually lived. However, the aim was to free these people from the dark powers that were inherent in many of these nature religions and bring them the liberating message of the Gospel. And in most places, it was also accompanied by the development of care and education, as an expression of the diaconate they wanted to bring along with the proclamation. In the whole woke movement, let us nevertheless be careful in unilaterally condemning these practices that also took place in a totally different time frame. The reaction of some missionaries after the council, to focus only on social service work, could certainly not be seen as a balanced response to the criticism expressed.

Proclamation of the Gospel remains an essential task within the church and each person must give it an appropriate interpretation in line with the situation in which they find themselves. Proclamation in a totally secularised environment where people have completely forgotten the name of Jesus and proclamation in an environment where people have never heard of Jesus will naturally require a different and appropriate approach. But in both areas, proclamation can still be expected, but perhaps more in the spirit as St Francis of Assisi expressed it, “Let us proclaim the message of the Gospel, in appropriate ways, if necessary by preaching about it.” Saint Pope Paul VI was also clear in this when he pointed out that people today listen more to witnesses than to



teachers, and when teachers do have to proclaim, they do so from the testimony of their lives. Again, and again, the importance of also living authentically what one teaches and proclaims resonates here. That will remain the criterion of 'success', if we may speak of success in this context, in every proclamation and every methodology developed around it.

Recently, I bumped into another text by Cardinal Newman that also makes us think. "The Church's greatest victories were all won before Constantine, in the days when there were no Christian armies and when the true Christian soldier was the martyr, whose testimony for Christ was non-violent. It was the martyrs who won Rome for Christ with a victory stable for 20 centuries. How long were the Crusaders able to keep Jerusalem?" Surely this is a confrontational observation that throws yet another light on the proclamation. It is from this reflection by Newman that I chose as my title: 'Martyr or Crusader?'

For many years, I have had the opportunity to walk regularly through Rome and visit the many places that remind us of the martyrs. When we enter ancient Rome, we realise how much blood flowed here of people who sacrificed their lives for Jesus, for their faith. Of ancient Rome, with its many temples, only ruins have been preserved, but the Catholic faith shines there not only through Rome's many churches, but also through the living faith we may meet there. "Martyrs whose witness for Christ were non-violent." This is how Newman describes those who laid the foundations on which the Church was built. It began with the two pillars of the Church: Peter and Paul. Even though Paul is always depicted with the sword in his hand, we know that it is the symbol of his inexhaustible struggle to proclaim the faith everywhere, and at the same time the gear with which he died martyrdom.

Martyrdom as a non-violent witness for Christ is not over. Even today, people still die for the sake of their faith and persecution of Christians

continues. Shortly before he himself died as a martyr at the foot of the altar, Bishop Romero said it would be a counter-witness and it would even be a disgrace if, in the fight against unjust structures, Christians and priests did not die as martyrs. After all, when we live our faith in a radical way, as Jesus calls us to do in the Gospel, it is inevitable that we will clash with situations and structures where anti-values prevail, and where people are not respected in their human dignity. As Christians, we neither can nor should stand on the side-lines and pretend our nose is bleeding.

Today, this means that we cannot remain silent when faced with trends in society where life is no longer respected, when it becomes like an obvious thing to kill unwanted life in the mother's womb. We must not remain silent in the face of that culture of death where anyone's life that is valued as useless in the eyes of society can simply be liquidated. We must not be silent towards a world that seems completely unhinged in terms of gender, where people want to become their own creators.

When Christians react against this, they do so from a clear vision of man and see man as the image and likeness of God, i.e. divine. When man is touched or man touches himself, something divine is touched. And there are limits to this that must be respected, that cannot be crossed. Now it seems as if there are no more boundaries. After all, once one has crossed the boundary of the divine, nothing or no one can stop man from going further. This is a taboo that has fallen in our Western society, tempting man to go ever further in what is described in the creation story as primal sin or original sin: wanting to be one's own god. But to realise this, one has to eliminate God himself. Here a new image of man and society emerges where man claims total ownership. What he had received from God's hand as custodian, he now claims ownership of. We see what the revolution that is all about with artificial intelligence brings about and what boundless aspirations are awakened, fuelled and nurtured in man.

That is where we stand, either as crusaders or martyrs. To the name 'martyr' belongs the word 'non-violent.' Non-violence does not mean that we should crawl into our shell and shroud ourselves in total silence, and that out of mere self-preservation. No, we retain the mission as Christians to proclaim the faith, by living radically and authentically ourselves according to the Gospel before anything else. It is from this basic attitude that we will and must speak and bring God present again, even if this will bring resistance and even persecution. That remains our lot as Christians in a world where God has been declared dead and where man has placed himself on God's throne. No, the winged phrase attributed to Nietzsche, is not yet a thing of the past. Once Pope John Paul II spoke that God had left the world. Some did not know what they were hearing.

But then the Pope continued, saying that man no longer offers God a place to be present and remain present in the world. It is up to us, in the environment where we live, to create this free space for God, to offer it to God and to bear witness to God's presence through our lives. There will always be those who want to do this as crusaders, by violently defending the faith. Surely these should think back to the Crusades, how temporary and short-lived their success was. Everything to do with faith cannot be captured and locked up in success stories. Therefore, we should also rightly have questions when people want to proclaim faith through marketing techniques. What we need today more than ever is that spirit of the martyrs who go out into the world from prayer, to bear witness to their faith with the power of God's grace, on occasion, if need be with words.



**Photos from  
SEDOS Annual General  
Assembly and Christmas Party**



## THE POOR Embraced by God's Plan for Justice and Compassion - Part I

### 1. Introduction

Throughout Church tradition, there has been a strong emphasis on caring for the poor and marginalised in society. Jesus himself taught that helping the poor is a central aspect of following him. The early Christian communities were known for their practice of sharing their resources and caring for those in need. The Church continues to prioritise this concern even today. This is reflected in the Church's teaching on social justice, which emphasises the importance of addressing systemic issues that contribute to poverty and inequality, as well as providing direct assistance to those who are struggling.

However, following the Second Vatican Council, there is a new way of understanding the poor in the Church. The poor are not just objects of charity for the wealthy. Theological reflection since the Council has sought to recover the hermeneutically privileged place of the poor in God's plan. This article therefore seeks to re-examine the place of the poor in contemporary Christian understanding. With this in mind, the article begins by looking briefly at the concept of the poor in the Bible. While analysing the significance of the poor in post-conciliar theological reflection, it also examines the notion of the 'option' for the poor in today's ecclesial context. Before highlighting some of the challenges of the option for the poor, it will also try to see how the teachings of Pope Francis could be useful in clarifying some of the issues related to it.

### 2. The Old Testament and the Poor

The poor is a privileged concept in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the biblical tradition, the term has a broader meaning than the more common notion of depravity or the lack of basic material needs. Often the context in which it is used and the person to whom it is addressed determine its meaning. For example, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus says: "Blessed are you who are

poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Lk 6:20). In Matthew's Beatitudes, we find an additional qualification to this saying of Jesus: "Blessed are the *poor in spirit*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:3). Although they seem similar, on closer examination we realise that the meaning of these expressions is not the same. The addition of 'in spirit' changes the meaning, both theologically and socially. This leads us to reflect briefly on how the Bible understands the poor.

Although poverty and the poor are important biblical and theological concepts today, they were not so in the early Jewish tradition. Poverty was by no means an ideal. In fact, in some places in the Bible, poverty was associated with wickedness. It was seen, particularly in the books of wisdom, as the mark of the lazy and the careless: "Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth" (Prov 10:4). Furthermore, the same tradition saw material prosperity as a sign of God's blessing or reward for a righteous life: "The righteous will flourish like a palm tree; they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon" (Ps 92:12).

With the passage of time, accompanied by mature reflection on their history and experiences, a change in perspective occurred. Scripture writers began to notice that many good people were among the poor: "Better the poor whose walk is blameless than the rich whose ways are perverse" (Prov 28:6). With this awareness came a growing consciousness of the rich man's obligation to help his poorer brethren (Lev 19:9-10). This insight into God's purposes brought "a holy reverence for misery." As a result, disrespect for the rights of the poor was seen as disrespect for God himself. Needless to say, it took a long time to come to this realisation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> P.F. Mulhern, *Dedicated Poverty* (Staten Island: Alba House, 1972), 1



The Book of Psalms is one of the few texts in the Old Testament (OT) that privileges the poor in its treatment of them. In the Psalms, in fact, the poor appear everywhere, especially in individual prayers, laments, and thanksgivings. The variety of terms used by the Psalmist to designate the poor cannot go unnoticed. The most prominent of these is *anawim*. In a broad sense, the term refers to the person who suffers poverty and affliction, and puts his/her trust in the Lord. Some authors are of the opinion that it was the poor, especially the people of low social status who were exploited by the rulers and the powerful within the religious society of ancient Israel, who inspired the composition of the Psalms.

There are two divergent views among scholars on the subject of *anawim* in the Bible. One view is that in ancient Israel there were two groups of people with similar names (*anawim* and *aniyyim*) who fell under the category of the poor. While *aniyyim* were economically poor and socially oppressed, *anawim* belonged to the pious religious movement that emerged during the exile. The latter came from different social classes, economically poor and otherwise, and their distinguishing characteristic was to promote a religious attitude of humility and docility before God. These pious Jews led a humble and detached life, ready to accept suffering as submission to God's will. They adopted this attitude with serenity, looking forward to the hope of eschatological fulfilment. These people were active in the formation of the Psalms. In the Psalms, they used the Servant of Yahweh of Second Isaiah as a model for the poor. Thus, they gave rise to the spirituality of *anawim* in the biblical tradition. What happened in this process was that the truly poor (*aniyyim*) and their social and economic conditions receded into the background, and the "virtue" of the poor (*anawim*) and the spirituality of poverty came to the forefront.

But some, on the other hand, believe that in the OT tradition the terms *anawim* and *aniyyim* were synonyms, with no difference in meaning. That is, for them, *anawim* and *aniyyim* are two ancient linguistic or dialectical variants of the same original word. Consequently, they hold that *anawim* encompasses not only a spiritual attitude of humility and detachment, but also a social and economic situation of poverty or

destitution. From this perspective, the poor are humble and docile not because they accept poverty as a "virtue," but because they are not like their oppressors. They do not respond violently to their oppressors with an eye-for-an-eye attitude. Moreover, what the poor long for is not the reward of a tested virtue, but the restoration of a violated order. They are motivated by a universal hope shared by every human being who suffers poverty and oppression on earth.

A third group seeks to reconcile these divergent views of the biblical concept of *anawim* by affirming that the poor of the Psalms are persons who trust in God in the midst of their misery, suffering, and oppression, and who do not respond with violence to their aggressors. The sad experience of their misery leads them to find support and hope in their religious faith. This religious attitude, especially in the post-exilic period, became so synonymous with the concept of the poor that it seemed to eclipse the social and economic dimension (Zeph 2:3). Here we cannot help noticing that the over-emphasis on the religious attitude of humility has taken the sting out of it. It has blunted the seriousness of the concrete and existential suffering of the poor.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the various schools of thought may say about the concept of the poor in the OT tradition, it is important to remember that Israel as a nation began its historical journey as an enslaved, poor, and oppressed people. For this reason, the Jewish creed reminds the people of Israel never to forget their formative years in Egypt:

My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labour. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression (Deut 26:5-7).

According to Lohfink, this creed, which refers to Israel's history of poverty, suffering, and

<sup>2</sup> Cf. E. Nardoni, *Rise up, O Judge: A Study of Justice in the Biblical World* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 126-27

liberation, is a confession of faith in the God who delivered the poor from bondage and led them to a land of freedom. It was an act of compassion on God's part. Here poverty and slavery are recognised as the product of human action. They are neither fate, nor the will of the gods, nor the result of people's personal failings. Pharaoh, as the symbolic figure of the social system, willed it and made it happen.<sup>3</sup> Given that most of the OT statements about the poor belong to the cultural context and linguistic formulation of the ancient Near East,<sup>4</sup> one would have expected a similar response from the God of Israel here. Following this pattern, we would have expected Yahweh to hear the cry of the poor in Egypt and come to their aid with immediate social relief or to resolve the problem through peaceful negotiation between the Israelites and Pharaoh.<sup>5</sup> But that is not what Yahweh did. He acted in a very different way from the deities of Israel's neighbours: "Yahweh's intervention does not aim, as do such acts of assistance elsewhere in the ancient Near East, to lighten the suffering while leaving the system intact or perhaps even aiding its renewed stabilization. *Instead, the poor are removed from the impoverishing situation.*"<sup>6</sup> In other words, in the face of suffering, God acts decisively, changing the course of Israel's history.

<sup>3</sup> N.F. Lohfink, *Option for the Poor: The Basic Principle of Liberation Theology in the Light of the Bible* (Berkeley: Bibal Press, 1987), 32.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Israel shared the social concern for the poor, the widow and the orphan common to the ancient Near East, particularly ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. Cf. Nardoni, *Rise up, O Judge*, 42.

<sup>5</sup> Although the gods of Near Eastern religions cared for the poor, they ensured the eternal survival of social structures that contained inequalities. These structures were seen as part of the order of creation. The gods protected them. Their option for the poor was aimed at "stabilising the existing system." In other words, the aim of the Near Eastern ethics "is merely to level the extremes and to avoid unbearable hardships. It thus serves to prevent sudden explosions within society, revolutions that would upset the whole complex, and in this sense, it actually helps to maintain the systems that produce poverty." Lohfink, *Option for the Poor*, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Lohfink, *Option for the Poor*, 32 (emphasis added). See also J.S. Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Reading and the Production of Meaning* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987); J.V. Pixley, *On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987).

Israel itself has been a victim of oppression and inequality at the hands of the powerful. The OT repeatedly reminds the Israelites of their harrowing history and warns them against exploitation and mistreatment of the poor and the stranger: "Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt" (Ex 23:9). They are invited to see in the face of the needy, especially in the face of a stranger, the memory of their suffering in Egypt. This memory should lead them to imitate God's compassion for them and to put it into practice in their dealings with others. While God's saving action in Egypt gave birth to Israel as a people with dignity, it also serves as a model for acting as God did on their behalf, especially in responding to the cry of the poor and oppressed. Concern for the poor is thus part of their identity as a people created and sustained by God.

We must not forget that the laws of Sinai originated in the events of liberation and are modelled after the spirit of a compassionate and redeeming God. The Covenant and the Decalogue must be read in this light.<sup>7</sup> One of the aims of the Covenant was to facilitate the transfer of the religious and ethical spirit that animated the Covenant norms to any new situation in which the people might find themselves. This spirit of the Covenant is used as a guide to answering the question: "What must a people do during the process of liberation and after it has been freed from oppression?"<sup>8</sup> It seems that the whole purpose of God's liberating action is to make a covenant with Israel and to establish the standards to be followed in order to be a free nation in his service. A new social order is envisaged: "According to this order, Yahweh intends that Israel be a nation of sisters and brothers in which there will be no more poor (Deut. 15:4)."<sup>9</sup> All members of the community are called to serve God and humanity. Here, service to God means acting according to the mind of their creator and liberator, i.e., living according to God's compassion, justice, and standard. In

<sup>7</sup> Cf. R. Latourelle, *Teologia della rivelazione* (Assisi: Cittadella, 1991), 398-402.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Nardoni, *Rise up, O Judge*, 69.

<sup>9</sup> Lohfink, *Option for the Poor*, 37.

other words, Israel as a nation is invited to imitate God in its commitment to others, especially the poor.

We can conclude that God reveals himself in a preferential way to the poor and afflicted in the historical events of liberation in the Old Testament. He comes to their aid and reveals himself as a compassionate God who is not indifferent to their plight. The poor thus become the *locus theologicus* in the OT theology. In other words, the insufficiency of the needy is a place of God's action and revelation. Thus, according to the OT tradition, the poor have a hermeneutically privileged place in God's plan, and God himself becomes the model of the preferential option for the poor.

### 3. Jesus and the Poor

The public ministry of Jesus, especially in the Gospel of Luke, began as the good news to the poor. Jesus reads from the Book of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor" (Lk 4:18). Does it mean that the Gospel is propagating just pauperism? Not at all! "God does not intend poverty and misery for his creation, but rather wealth and plenty; and that God's special concern for the poor thus can never be understood in a static-metaphysical sense, but only as a phase in the historical drama between God and humanity."<sup>10</sup> It is the subsequent sinful structure of human society that has given rise to social inequality. In the Exodus story, as seen above, God challenged that oppressive structure and offered an alternative with the Sinai Covenant, creating God's people as a contrasting society.

Although the poor and poverty were dominant themes in the earliest materials of the Gospels, they lost their importance in the later NT traditions and in the early Church. This was largely because the world had changed radically for the early Christian communities, and Christians were so preoccupied with their internal community' concerns that they had no time for the social problems of the day.<sup>11</sup> This was not the case when Jesus began his ministry. So, we shall see briefly how poor was an important theme for Jesus.

One may ask: who was Jesus? What was his social condition? Nardoni puts it aptly:

Before his public ministry, Jesus was neither a farmer, a landowner, a merchant, nor a wealthy man. On the other hand, he was not needy or a beggar. He was characterized as a *tekton* ("carpenter" or "artisan"). This term did not designate someone who was indigent but, rather, a person who possessed skills that conferred a certain social identity, enabling one to work wherever his service was needed. Neither were his disciples indigent. Some were fishermen who had laborers in their service (Mk 1:20). There was even a tax collector among them.<sup>12</sup>

We know from the Gospel accounts of his public ministry that Jesus chose poverty in accordance with his mission, which Luke skilfully develops in the episode in the synagogue of Nazareth (Lk 4:16-21). And what kind of poverty did he choose? In all probability, looking at the Gospel narratives, it can be said with a fair degree of certainty that he assumed the poverty of an itinerant prophet and teacher. He embraced poverty to preach the Kingdom of God. Although he preached the Kingdom to both the poor and the rich, he did not promote a social revolution of the poor against the rich. But Jesus taught the futility of wealth and warned of the danger of becoming a victim of one's wealth (Mt 10:17-27). Jesus' life and preaching invited the rich to rethink their behaviour and change their lives according to the new order that the Kingdom of God would establish (Lk 19:1-10).

As mentioned above, the central theme of Jesus' teaching was the Kingdom of God. This was not just an inner predisposition of an individual or an ideology. For Jesus, the Kingdom was a complex reality. It encompassed spiritual, social, political, and temporal realities. It is important to remember that in Jesus' time in Palestine, religion and politics were intertwined. As a prophet and teacher, Jesus could not escape the social and political realities of his day. Therefore, his message had social and political implications. The New Testament testifies that Jesus was concerned with the whole life of the people in all its dimensions,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 48-49.

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<sup>12</sup> Nardoni, *Rise up, O Judge*, 181

especially if we take into account his healing and teaching ministries. One of the social realities of his time, as of all times, was the sad plight of the poor.<sup>13</sup> For him, poverty concerned both the spiritual and the temporal aspects of human existence. Jesus addressed this theme in the Beatitudes, especially in the first.

Some commentators believe that the Sermon on the Mount and its teachings came from a pre-Matthean oral tradition. “Their content was to be delivered orally, that is, spoken aloud, repeated, and memorized.”<sup>14</sup> The author of Matthew’s Gospel incorporated these teachings into his Gospel without much change. It contains the core teachings of Jesus from a conservative Judeo-Christian perspective. The first part of the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-6) speaks of the inheritors of the Kingdom of God and their present social condition. These heirs of the Kingdom are the poor. Jesus assures them that their present condition will not last forever. There will be an eschatological reversal.

It is significant to note that Matthew qualifies the poor with the expression “poor in spirit” (*ptochoi to pneumatē*) which is missing in Luke’s parallel verse (Lk 6:20). Matthew may have added it to emphasize that material poverty alone does not entitle one to enter the Kingdom of God. A religious attitude, with an inner commitment to poverty, is also necessary. In other words, Matthew wants to emphasize that not all materially deprived persons will be counted as blessed, but only those who experience material poverty along with a deep trust in God. At the same time, however, it must be said that being “poor in spirit” as a religious attitude is not sufficient to inherit the Kingdom of God, since the following verses (Mt 5:4-6) give a list of people who are the companions of the poor. Their condition is not a spiritual attitude or just an “inner commitment to poverty”<sup>15</sup> but a social reality: “The poor in spirit are placed parallel to those who actually mourn, who are oppressed, and who hunger and thirst. To all of these is promised not a reward

for their virtue but the eschatological reversal of their present condition in the new world of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, if we read it together with the Lucan version of Jesus’ saying, we cannot say that the poor in spirit in Matthew refers only to a person’s spiritual/religious attitude. Simply put, “poor in spirit” in Matthew cannot be read in isolation.

The biblical concept of the poor must also be understood from a Christological perspective. Through the Incarnation, God identifies himself with humanity. This identification is concretely realised in space and time in Palestine two thousand years ago. God becomes a human being, *Emmanuel*. He shares our finite human reality. His life is not only a sharing of human existence, but a pro-existence. That is to say, it is an existence-for-others. Who are these others? The needy. Even in his pro-existence, he shares our human limitations. His earthly life is confined to a geographically limited group with all its cultural and traditional limitations. But within this limited group, he has a preference: the poor.

Jesus’ preferential option for the poor and needy is evident in his life and ministry. This preference for the poor is not just an individual choice of Jesus. He expects it of all who follow him. This is the message of the parable of the Last Judgement (Mt 25:31-46). The list of people who receive God’s preferential attention includes the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the sick, and the prisoners. There is no reference to nationality or religion. In other words, the preferential option is universal, embracing the peoples of all nations. How does he identify himself with all nations? The answer comes from the Judge’s reply to the astonished people of nations: “‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me’” (Mt 25:44-45). Here Jesus identifies himself with the poor, with those who need our attention. “The new society arising out of Jesus’ gospel for the poor is in the world now. Long ago it broke through the bounds of the original Israel, and the pilgrimage of the

<sup>13</sup> Cf. J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 109-119.

<sup>14</sup> H.D. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon of the Mount, including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3-7:27 and Luke 6: 10- 49)* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 83.

<sup>15</sup> Lohfink, *Option for the Poor*, 62.

<sup>16</sup> Nardoni, *Rise up, O Judge*, 221.



nations has been in progress ever since.”<sup>17</sup> As Christianity expands, especially after the Paschal Mystery, the horizon widens.

The key to this widening of horizons is the poor and the needy. In a sense, it is the option for the poor that marks the universalism of Christianity. The least of this world have become the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ: “The face of the needy is the face of Christ.”<sup>18</sup>

*(The Second part of the article Continued....)*

## Part II

### 4. The Poor in Theology

The poor became a prominent theme in theology with Latin American liberation theology’s advocacy of a ‘preferential option for the poor.’ Until then, in theology, poverty was a concept that remained in the realm of those who sought spiritual perfection. Such an understanding of poverty either highlighted the sinful nature of the human condition before God or the virtue of renouncing worldly possessions in order to serve God through a life of simplicity. While the former emphasised the spiritual attitude of humility of heart over greed and pride, the latter invited a certain category of Christians, especially religious, to renounce personal possessions through a vow to achieve spiritual excellence. Although religious people strive to give up worldly goods, being in the world, they cannot help but use worldly things to advance in their spiritual progress. Therefore, “religious poverty seeks to enter into a stylized form of physical poverty in order to fully realize spiritual poverty.”<sup>19</sup> Before liberation theology emerged, however, very little space was given in theological discourse to the actual poor who lacked the basic necessities of life.

Even when the poor found a place in theological considerations, it was for the benefit of the rich. Echoing a certain strand of the OT concept of magnanimity (Lev 23:22), such reflections encouraged the rich to show charity to the less well-off in order to gain spiritual benefits for

themselves. In other words, the rich remained the protagonists who were asked to recognise that poverty and wealth represented spiritual opportunities and temptations. Moreover, the theological interpretation of poverty was closely related to its understanding of salvation. The rich were often reminded that the poor embodied Christ and were privileged in God’s eyes. The rich needed them as objects of charity for their own sanctification. “This became the ‘social contract of the Middle Ages, that is, the duty of the poor to remain poor so that the salvation of the rich might be secured. Poverty became not a problem to be solved but an opportunity for the rich to obtain merit.”<sup>20</sup>

Liberation theologians changed this perspective and placed the poor at the centre of theological discourse. In a sense, liberation theology itself can be understood as an attempt to radicalise the social doctrine of the Church for the cause of the poor. For it, the poor are not cannon fodder for the spiritual benefit of the rich.

They have their own identity and are the privileged locus of theological reflection. Moreover, for liberation theologians, poverty is not an imaginary spiritual concept but a physical reality here and now. In short, it is the merit of Latin American theology to have rescued the poor from the shadow of abstract theological reflection.

### 5. Latin American Theology and the Poor

Broadly speaking, Latin American theology has two strands of thought - liberation theology and the theology of the people. The theology of the people is generally regarded as a post-conciliar theology developed in Argentina, notably by Lucio Gera and Rafael Tello, based on popular culture and piety. Liberation theology, on the other hand, is a pan-Latin American ecclesial movement that has sought to shape Church and society through distinctive ideas and practices. But even in Argentina, until the disagreements about the meaning of revolution and armed struggle, the spirit of liberation theology and the inspiration of the Latin American Bishops’ Conference of Medellin (1968) were present.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Lohfink, *Option for the Poor*, 61-62.

<sup>18</sup> Nardoni, *Rise up, O Judge*, 234.

<sup>19</sup> B. Pattison “Poverty,” in *The Cambridge dictionary of Christian theology*, ed. I. A. McFarland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 400.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> According to Loland, the electoral success of the political left in Latin America, especially in Venezuela and Brazil, is partly the result of political mobilisation

At the risk of oversimplifying, it can be said that while the theology of the people focuses on culture and evangelisation, liberation theology emphasises the praxis of faith and its demands on society in the face of abject poverty, injustice, and oppression. According to Azcuy, the difference between these two schools boils down to the option between ‘evangelisation’ and ‘liberation.’<sup>22</sup> Although both schools do concern themselves with the poor, they differ in their approach. While the theology of the people arrives at the poor through the Second Vatican Council’s notion of the ‘people of God’ and its interrelationships with various peoples, liberation theologians like Gutierrez locate the poor in their unjust historical and social context within the framework of the Christian faith. As Scannone has maintained, the theology of the people has privileged a historical-cultural analysis over the structural social analysis of liberation theology. Furthermore, the theology of the people is distinguished from liberation theology in its refusal to be informed by the thought and categories of Marxist philosophy.<sup>23</sup> For the theology of the people, the poor are those who preserve the very culture of their people as the structuring principle of everyday common life and preserve the historical memory of the people. The poor guarantee the interests of the people with a common historical project of justice and peace, especially when they live in an oppressive situation of structural injustice and institutionalised violence. For the advocates of the theology of the people, therefore, the option for the poor coincides with the option for culture.<sup>24</sup>

Liberation theologians, on the other hand, go beyond the above position on the question of the poor. They believe that the poor are the privileged locus of God’s action in the world and that there is no need to seek justification for

a commitment to the poor on the basis of cultural or theological premises. That is why Gutierrez affirms,

The Church’s pastoral action is not arrived at as a conclusion from theological premises. Theology does not lead to pastoral activity, but is rather a reflection on it. Theology should find the Spirit present in it, inspiring the actions of the Christian community. The life of the Church will be for it a *locus theologicus*.<sup>25</sup>

Liberation theologians come to this conviction because their theology has grown out of the lived experience of Christian communities in close solidarity with the oppressed. It is a way of *doing* theology.<sup>26</sup> Their reflections start from the lived experience of faith, shared and celebrated in practice (*praxis*). In other words, liberation theologians insist on the primacy of *praxis* over isolated spirituality.<sup>27</sup> Theology is inconceivable if not related to *praxis*. For them, in the ecclesial context, community in *praxis* takes precedence over community in truth. *Praxis* is the “first act” of faith. Theology comes only afterward as a “second act.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, liberation theology starts its reflection, not from an abstraction of faith, but from the underside of the history of faith, from the “antihistory” of the lowly and downtrodden. Therefore, it takes on the gaze of the poor. At the same time, it is a critical reflection on the historical *praxis* of faith in relation to the word of God. Such a reflection of faith cannot be done without a liberation *praxis*. It is an understanding of faith from the perspective of an option and a commitment.<sup>29</sup> In Sobrino’s words,

A supposed faith in God that would allow injustice, for whatever reason, or would allow

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within grassroots Catholic communities inspired by liberation theology. See, O.J. Loland, “The Solved Conflict: Pope Francis and Liberation Theology,” *International Journal of Latin American Religions* 5/2 (2021): 290-291.

<sup>22</sup> V.R. Azcuy, “Introduction,” in *La Teología Argentina Del Pueblo*, eds. V.R. Azcuy and Lucio Gera (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Universidad Alberto Hurtado, 2015), 30.

<sup>23</sup> J.C. Scannone, “Pope Francis and the Theology of the People,” *Theological Studies* 77/1 (2016): 124.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-21.

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<sup>25</sup> G. Gutierrez, “Notes for a Liberation Theology,” *Theological Studies* 31/2 (1970): 244-45.

<sup>26</sup> V. Araya Guillen, *God of the Poor: The Mystery of God in Latin American Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 16.

<sup>27</sup> Loland, “The Solved Conflict: Pope Francis and Liberation Theology,” 293.

<sup>28</sup> G. Gutierrez, *Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), 200.

<sup>29</sup> G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 9.

peaceful coexistence with injustice, would not really be faith at all. One who does not struggle against death and against the idols that kill does not have true faith in the God of life. Faith in God means rejection of murderous idols, and this is not simply in intention but in practice.<sup>30</sup> The liberation theologians therefore propose a sort of ecclesial *praxis* in the form of concrete struggle for the oppressed as the starting point for the true faith.

Like Metz in political theology, liberation theologians believe that any treatment of positive themes in theology such as God, Christ, and the Kingdom of God, without regard to its believing subject is a pointless abstraction. Christian faith is primarily a *practical* idea.<sup>31</sup> When liberation theology asserts that the *praxis* of faith is the “first act,” it must show who the subject of this act is. In Latin America, the poor, in a real and material sense, are the subject of this faith-guided action (*praxis*). These are the oppressed, the marginalised, the hungry, and those whose basic right to life is threatened. In faith, these “subjects” approach and experience the great theological themes from “their” perspective. Therefore, Araya Guillen affirms, “Liberation theology is not a theology of the poor (as a new theme), or a theology for the poor (as addressed paternalistically to the poor), but a theology set in motion from a point of departure in the poor, the poor as interlocutor, as historical subject.”<sup>32</sup> For liberation theology, meaning arises when there is a fusion of horizons — divine and human. Therefore, it believes that theological themes such as God, Christ, Church, etc. cannot be treated in isolation, without taking into account the “subjects” and their daily experience of faith. From this perspective, liberation theology speaks of the poor as *locus theologicus* and makes explicit the fundamental content of their perspective.

Absent from history until now, the poor in Latin America are suddenly becoming present to it. This privileged theological role of the poor enables liberation theology to situate and

articulate Christian themes in a credible manner. For them, the principal and genuine mediation to access the mystery of God in an oppressed context is the poor. According to Sobrino, “access to the ever greater and transcendent God comes through contact with the God who is ‘lesser,’ hidden in the little ones, crucified on the cross of Jesus and on the countless crosses of the oppressed of our day.”<sup>33</sup> That is why Gutierrez argues that the forms of God’s presence determine how we come to encounter God. “If humanity, each person, is the living temple of God, we meet God in our encounter with others; we encounter God in the commitment to the historical process of humankind.”<sup>34</sup> Consequently, theological reflection should bear in mind that the experience of the mystery of God consists not only in knowing that we are dependent on him, but also in knowing that he makes demands on us.

But who then are the poor for the liberation theologians? For them, defining the poor based on “creaturely poverty” does not do justice to the poor of this world. It is not just a human attribute, claiming that being poor is part of the human constitution as a creature. Every human being as such is needy, incomplete, and limited in self-realisation, especially in relation to death. For liberation theologians, such an understanding does not face the problem head-on and avoids the real issue. For them, poverty is not a natural “accident” of need, but is structural. The poor are therefore the by-product of social injustice. It needs to be addressed in the light of a mature Christian faith derived from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It calls for an option for the poor, not just charity. It requires reading the signs of the times and applying the theological method indicated by the Second Vatican Council (GS 4): see, judge, act.<sup>35</sup>

To validate their claim, they point to the ministry of Jesus. Since Jesus identifies with the poor, his followers must be committed to the poor. In the face of systemic poverty and exploitation, the Church must make a conscious choice. This choice is called the ‘option for the poor.’ It cannot be just any option, but it must

<sup>30</sup> J. Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 57.

<sup>31</sup> J.B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2007), 60-84.

<sup>32</sup> Guillén, *God of the Poor*, 20.

<sup>33</sup> Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 56.

<sup>34</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 110.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Guillén, *God of the Poor*, 113-120.

be a ‘preferential option.’ One cannot ignore the fact that the poor cannot claim equality with the rich under present conditions. They are not present in the decision-making or decision-taking process of the present social order that directly affects their lives. The rich exercise power and the poor are excluded or pushed to the margins of society. Without a preferential option, the poor are nowhere to be found. It calls for affirmative actions that enable the poor to be the protagonists of their own lives. We know from the Gospel that Jesus made this preferential option with sinners and outcasts. They were the poor of his time. This is why liberation theologians have generally argued that, in the face of gross social and economic inequality, to be the Church of all means to be the Church of the poor, since failure to side with the poor invariably reinforces the structures that cause poverty and thereby belies the Church’s commitment to the good of all. To describe this option as ‘preferential’ is to affirm that it is relative rather than absolute: to opt for the poor is not to reject or ignore other groups, but to recognise that solidarity with the poor is God’s means of realising the blessings of the Kingdom of God for all people.<sup>36</sup>

In their theological reflections, some liberation theologians have sought to use Marxist class analysis to highlight the ‘epistemological privilege of the poor’ in their efforts to understand the Gospel’s critique of unjust economic and political structures. They argue that communion with God is only possible through identification with and commitment to the cause of the poor, through whom God is revealed. According to Pattison, recent Catholic Magisterium prior to Pope Francis has been cautious in adopting the language of the ‘preferential option.’

The Vatican has appeared more inclined to use the language of ‘preferential love’ as a means of affirming the Church’s commitment to the poor while both (John Paul II and Benedict XVI) avoiding any suggestion that this commitment is exclusive and distancing itself from explicitly

Marxist principles of social analysis and revolutionary praxis.<sup>37</sup>

## 6. Pope Francis and the Poor

Since Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio became Pope, the poor have become a major theme in Catholic theological discourse. Pope Francis believes that the poor have an important role to play in the life of the Church. This is evidenced by the fact that, for the first time, the Church established the *World Day of the Poor* in 2017. For Pope Francis, the scandal of poverty in a world of plenty is a piercing moral challenge for the Church and the whole human community.<sup>38</sup> Choosing “Francis” as his name, Cardinal Bergoglio would signal that as Pope where his priorities are. He sees his ministry as a call to serve the poor. He wants a Church that is poor and for the poor. Early in his pontificate, he recalls how he perceived God’s call to lead the Church as an invitation to care for the poor.

During the election, I was sitting next to the Archbishop Emeritus of Sao Paulo and Prefect Emeritus of the Congregation for the Clergy, Cardinal Claudio Hummes, a good friend. When things started to move in a dangerous direction, he comforted me. When the votes reached the two thirds, there was the usual applause, because I had been elected. Then, he hugged, kissed, and told me: “Do not forget the poor!” That word made an impact on me: the poor, the poor. Immediately, I thought of Francis of Assisi in relation to the poor.<sup>39</sup>

Pope Francis would interpret this option for the poor through symbolic acts such as refusing to live in the papal palace, washing the feet of prisoners on Holy Thursday, or planning papal visits to places associated with social exclusion. Being of Argentine origin, Pope Francis is naturally influenced by Latin American theology. But Pope Francis’ interest in the poor cannot be explained by the ideas of liberation theology. Rather, he is concerned about some of the ideological infiltrations of liberation theology. Although there is now a *bonhomie* between Pope Francis and liberation

<sup>36</sup> I. M. McFarland, “Option for the Poor,” in *The Cambridge dictionary of Christian theology*, ed. I. A. McFarland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 406.

<sup>37</sup> Pattison, “Poverty,” 401.

<sup>38</sup> R.W. McElroy, “A Church for the Poor,” *America* 209/11 (21 Oct 2013), 13.

<sup>39</sup> Pope Francis, “A Church that is poor and is for the poor,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 20 March 2013, 6.



theologians, some writers still believe that Pope Francis engages with liberation theology through symbolic gestures rather than open intellectual engagement with specific expressions of the movement's innovative ideas.<sup>40</sup> As Archbishop of Buenos Aires, he emphasised that the Church should not engage in partisan or ideological politics and insisted that the Church's concern for the poor should flow from the dictates of the Gospel. On this point, he seems to have been inspired by the theology of the people as advocated by Rafael Tello and Lucio Gera.<sup>41</sup> In addition, Pope Francis' ecclesial vision of the poor is strongly influenced by the teaching of Pope Paul VI, especially his apostolic exhortation on evangelisation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975). Pope Francis himself acknowledges it when he says that "*Evangelii Nuntiandi* is the greatest pastoral postconciliar document."<sup>42</sup> Pope Francis believes that the preferential option for the poor should be above any party or "class outlook" and it should embrace multiple ways of approaching the poor, ranging from traditional Christian charity to modern social activism. Having said that, however, he does not spare the inhuman trickle-down theories and market economy of the present day.

Just as the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say "thou shalt not" to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? This is a case of exclusion. Can we continue to stand by when food is thrown away while people are starving? This is a case of inequality (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 53).

Here the Pope highlights the link between the realities of economic inequality and the death of the poor, on the one hand, and the idolatry of money and the deadly logic of the market economy, on the other. When he states that the

challenge today is not so much atheism as the "spiritual consumerism tailored to one's own unhealthy individualism" that accompanies the idolatry of the modern economy, he seems to echo the concerns raised by Sobrino.<sup>43</sup>

As mentioned above, Pope Francis often warns against mixing faith with "ideology," whether from the extreme right or the proactive left. Conservatives may use faith as a tool to advance their pet projects in the name of fidelity to tradition. In doing so, they may ignore the signs of the times and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, activists can use religion as an ideological platform to promote personal or sectarian agendas in the name of social commitment. When the Church's faith becomes an ideology, it frightens people and drives them away. According to Pope Francis, Jesus is not present in ideologies with his love, forgiveness, and tenderness. When a Christian becomes a disciple of an ideology, he/she loses the power of faith: he/she is no longer a disciple of Jesus, but a disciple of a certain thought.<sup>44</sup> For Pope Francis, the fundamental problem with ideology is that it excludes others who have a perspective other than their own, thus narrowing the missionary horizon.

It's important not to exclude anybody, and not to exclude oneself, because everybody needs everybody. A fundamental part of helping the poor involves the way we see them. An ideological approach is useless: it ends up using the poor in the service of other political or personal interests (*EG*, 199). Ideologies end badly, and are useless. They relate to people in ways that are either incomplete, unhealthy, or evil. Ideologies do not embrace a people. You just have to look at the last century. What was the result of ideologies? Dictatorships, in every case. Always think to the people, never stop thinking about the good of the people.<sup>45</sup>

The bottom line is that, for Pope Francis,

<sup>43</sup> J. Sobrino, *Jesus The Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Kent: Bums & Oates, 1994), 180-86.

<sup>44</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris laetitia*, no. 308; cf. Pope Francis, "Disciples of the Lord and not of ideology," *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 25 October 2013, 13.

<sup>45</sup> Pope Francis, "A more humane society is possible," *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 17 July 2015, 17. See also Pope Francis, "Se la stanchezza mi annebbierà darò le dimissioni," *La Repubblica*, 10 March 2023, 10.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Loland, "The Solved Conflict: Pope Francis and Liberation Theology," 288-89

<sup>41</sup> See Pope Francis, "Prefazione," in E.C. Bianchi, *Introduzione alla teologia del popolo* (Bologna: EMI, 2015), 18-22.

<sup>42</sup> Pope Francis, "The Three Loves of Paul VI," *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 26 June 2013, 5.

ideology runs the risk of being motivated by strategies that are often socially conditioned and reactionary in nature. The faith-driven pursuit of God's will, on the other hand, is a dispassionate and yet purpose-oriented Christian existence. Therefore, Pope Francis asks us to reflect on what motivates us to act in a particular way. Does the Gospel, especially the message of love, guide our actions? Is it part of the believer's ongoing process of discernment? In other words, while we are on the side of the poor, we cannot avoid the question of what motivates us to have the option for the poor. At the end of the day, for Pope Francis, it is not great ideas that we can give to others, but ourselves.

## 7. The Option for the Poor and Its Challenge Today

Following in the footsteps of Pope Francis, we can highlight one of the challenges that the option for the poor is facing today, as it always has. Every option requires a purification of intention. If Christian social action, including the option for the poor, is not motivated by the Gospel, it is open to suspicion and criticism of mixed motives, whether personal or communitarian. If not perceived as a genuine act of love born of evangelical conviction, it could be interpreted as an attempt at proselytism and religious expansion, or as sheep-stealing. It could also be seen as an expression of suppressed resentment, which Nietzsche used to discredit Christianity. For Nietzsche, the Christian's love of the poor is nothing but camouflaged resentment, a subtle but powerful revenge of the weak against the strong.<sup>46</sup>

Nietzsche claims that the Christian concern for the poor is an outgrowth of Jewish morality. In his view, the often-conquered Jewish people achieved "spiritual revenge" over the powerful civilisations through a slave revolt in morality. A sense of powerlessness in the face of foreign conquerors led Jewish civilisation to invent a new system of spiritual values based on the wretchedness of the poor, the impotent, the sick, and the ugly. Judaism achieved its victory over

the powerful through the message of love that brought blessedness and victory to the poor, the sick, and the sinners. Finally, the resentment-laden Jews transferred to their God the vengeance they themselves could not address. For Nietzsche, Jesus is the embodiment of this transfer of hatred. "Did Israel not reach the pinnacle of her sublime vengefulness via this very 'redeemer,' this apparent opponent of disperser of Israel?"<sup>47</sup> In Nietzsche's interpretation, the ideal of Christian love of the poor is the triumphant crown of Jewish hatred toward the power whom they cannot defeat. In short, according to Nietzsche, the Christian's idea of God is still avenging Yahweh. The only difference is that revenge is now disguised as a false love for the wretched.<sup>48</sup>

This distorted view of Christianity and its understanding of love, as presented by Nietzsche, is totally unacceptable to any Christian who knows what he/she believes and whom he/she follows. But Nietzsche's observations make us reflect on our own motives for choosing to serve the poor. Put simply, why do we choose to serve the poor? Are we really moved by the spirit of love and concern for the needy that we find in Jesus, as he explains in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), or by an exaggerated sense of justice? Do our own histories, personal ideas, agendas, ideologies, or states of being influence how we choose to act? We are reminded of Tolstoy's saying: "As fire cannot extinguish fire, so evil cannot suppress evil. Good alone, confronting evil and resisting its contagion, can overcome evil."<sup>49</sup> Spiritually, this is a great challenge for every Christian who chooses to serve the poor.

## 8. Concluding Remarks

The Bible teaches that assisting the poor is not only a moral imperative, but also a way of honouring God and showing compassion to our fellow human beings. Jesus emphasises the link between caring for the poor and serving God: "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the

<sup>46</sup> F.W. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017). See also M. Scheler, *L'homme du ressentiment* (Paris: Gallimard, 1933).

<sup>47</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 18.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. P.H. Byrne, "Resentment and the Preferential Option for the Poor," *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 218-19.

<sup>49</sup> L. Tolstoy, *My Religion - What I Believe* (Guildford: White Crow Books, 2009), 41.

least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). The first Christian communities put this into practice. For example, the Acts of the Apostles shows how the Church responded to the needy by sharing resources, caring for the vulnerable, and giving generously to those in need (Acts 6:1 -7). Following the Church’s tradition, the poor have been part of Christian practice and reflection throughout the centuries. However, the poor became a *locus theologicus* only with the emergence of liberation theology and the recent ecclesial consciousness of social justice after the Second Vatican Council. Liberation theologians stress the need for the Church to stand in solidarity with the poor, to listen to their voices and experiences, and to work with them to build a more just and equitable society. This involves not only providing material assistance to the poor, but also working to change the systems and structures that perpetuate poverty and inequality.

Having said that, however, today we need to re-examine this option for the poor in order to make it more effective in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. A maxim attributed to Lord Hewart says, “Justice must not only be done but must also be seen to be done.” In the same way, Christian service to the poor must not only be done justly, but must also be seen to be done with integrity and the right intention. Perception is an important element of witness. Through our works or actions, others must be able to perceive and be drawn to the source of all human beings, the invisible God who expressed himself as love in Jesus Christ. That is why, in his homily to the Latin American Church, Pope Benedict XVI reminds the faithful that “the Church does not engage in proselytism. Instead, she grows by ‘attraction’: just as Christ ‘draws all to himself’ by the power of his love, culminating in the sacrifice of the Cross.”<sup>50</sup>

From a Christian point of view, the option for the poor without Christ not only means not sharing in the ministry of Jesus, but can also be an expression of self-centred philanthropy for grandstanding and self-aggrandisement. The Christian cannot separate the commandment of

the unity of love (Mk 12:29-31), either for an exaggerated and fanatical love for God without loving the others, or for a pure social action without any reference to the source of this action, God. Lohfink rightly says that only by following Jesus will we be able to create the new society that God has in mind. There is no easy way out except through the practice of faith. “Anyone who interprets the central texts of the Bible concerning the poor as meaning some kind of aid for the poor that is possible without faith and without transformation of the world within the believing community is misusing these texts and is not doing them justice.”<sup>51</sup>

Again, the way in which we serve the poor is also important. St. Paul urges us to be cheerful givers (2 Cor 9:7). That is why Pope Francis asks us to reflect on how we give charity to others: “Am I able to stop and look in the face, in the eye of that person who is asking me?”<sup>52</sup> Our solidarity with the poor (by sharing in their lives or by offering material or financial help to those in need) should be an expression of our experience of faith, which Pope Francis identifies with the joy of the Gospel.

Finally, as Christians, we cannot deny that the poor are a *locus theologicus* of God’s revelation. If so, it also testifies to how we understand God (the image of God we have) and how we communicate that image to others. In other words, the way we treat the poor shows what kind of God we follow and how much we have understood him. At the same time, the Christian understanding of God tells us that he is neither indifferent nor vindictive and retributive in the face of human suffering. He patiently invites all to conversion and encourages us to work with him for a better world, for he is a God of love. If God is love, then our lives should be an imitation of that love (1 Jn 4:8).

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<sup>50</sup> Benedict XVI, “Be faithful disciples, so as to be courageous and effective missionaries,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 16 May 2007, 13.

<sup>51</sup> N.E Lohfink, *Option for the Poor: The Basic Principle of Liberation Theology in the Light of the Bible* (Berkeley: Bibal Press, 1987), 64.

<sup>52</sup> Pope Francis, “Look Them in the Eye,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 15 April 2016, 16.

## Involvement of Divine Word Missionaries in the Development of Health Services in Papua New Guinea

*The purpose of our missionary life is to bring fullness of life and God's goodness to others, especially caring for those in need. Since the beginning of SVD mission in (Papua) New Guinea (PNG), serving the sick was an integral part of the holistic approach to promotion of human development. Besides the fact that in early mission days some SVD brothers and priests were directly caring for the sick, many parish priests were actively supporting the development of health care in their parishes. There were different ways in which the SVD missionaries supported health service development, including finding sponsors for building health centres and providing many forms of support for SSps sisters and lay nurses serving the sick directly. Unfortunately, most of these indirect forms of support of health development went unrecorded. Therefore, this paper aims to portray the SVD missionaries' contribution to the development of church health services in PNG.*

### Introduction

Healing, both physically and spiritually, was in the centre of Christianity all the way back to the time of Jesus Christ. In the history of theological interpretation of human suffering there were different interpretations of the meaning of suffering. In the twentieth century, many theologians portrayed the suffering of the poor as a sign of the suffering Christ, arguing that Christians should work towards the alleviation of suffering and the creation of a better and more just world (Porterfield, 2005). Care for the sick was a distinctive feature of early Christian missionary activity. For instance, Harakas noted that holy men in the early Christian church “used the panoply of prayer together with their medical skills, folk wisdom, and herbal lore to cure the ills of others” (Flint, 1991, 187-192). As a result of this long-lasting interest by Christianity in human suffering and in the attempt to follow

Christ, whose healing ministry to the sick occupies a remarkable part of his ministry, it is not surprising that early missionaries involved themselves in medicine and ministry to the sick (Porterfield, 2005). The spirituality of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) as summarised in the *Constitutions* portray the care for holistic human development by stating that “we promote true human progress” (SVD *Constitutions*, no. 101) or through our mission we want to “bring the fullness of life to others” [...] and make “God’s love visible especially by unconditional devotion to those in need” (SVD *Constitutions*, Prologue).

From the beginnings of the SVD mission in PNG, missionaries were concerned with the health of the people (Mihalic, 1999, 264-283). Early, in building many mission stations, the missionaries attempted to set up a mission health centre or hospital. The first clinics were usually opened at the mission stations and SVD brothers and priests and more often SSps sisters trained in nursing were involved in the ministry to the sick. According to Catholic Health Services records, in 1994, the Catholic Church ran 120 clinics in 17 dioceses. The total number of Catholic Church health workers was 780. The Catholic Church Health Services (CCHS) involvement in health care is growing and in 2019, the “Catholic Church runs 248 health facilities, including 2 district hospitals and 3 rural hospitals, 22 stand-alone VCT clinics, 40 health centres operational in 21 provinces, 99 sub-health centres, 11 urban clinics, 82 level-1 facilities including 84 aid posts, 5 health training schools. The health care services that the CCHS offers is delivered by 1462 employees. In 2017 CCHS reported that almost 1.7 million people received health care through their service” (Faliszek, 2019). Currently, CCHS cover approximately 50% of all rural health care (NDOH, 2019).



While some reports on the role of the Catholic mission in developing health services have been published (Kettle, 1979; Steffen, 2020a; Mihalic, 1999), they predominantly focused on SSpS sisters' involvement in direct health care as trained health professionals. This article aims to focus more on SVD brothers and priests involved in health service development including not only direct involvement in professional health service, but also going beyond that frame by describing various forms of spiritual and logistic support provided to the development of health services especially for the disadvantaged rural population. While this paper does not claim to provide a comprehensive historical report on SVD missionaries' involvement in the development of health services, it attempts to describe their multidimensional support based on accessible direct reports and historical records.

### ***Direct Involvement in Health Service Provision***

Since the very beginning, when in 1896 the Divine Word Missionaries took up their missionary engagement in PNG, they were involved in the health ministry. That time, many SVD priests and brothers received informal training in first aid and administration of basic medicine. "Father Janssen had Fathers Erdweg and Vormann take a special course in medicine at a German hospital, believing the knowledge would greatly assist them in New Guinea" (Bronfman, 1981, 381).

One of the first missionaries in PNG wrote to his mother: "Right from the beginning we cared for their sick. Two of us have some knowledge of medicine. Because now the wounds and ulcers, which occur here in large numbers, were healed, we gained more and more the hearts of all. [...] From afar, the natives come to the missionary to complain of their suffering and to find care and healing"<sup>1</sup> (Auf der Heide, 1900, 478-479).

For instance, Brother Clarentius Petry, SVD, before starting his mission at Tumleo Island received significant training in nursing, dental techniques and medicine courses. He reported that when in 1908, Fr Joseph Erdweg was

leaving Tumleo Island, he had to take over the pharmacy and care for the sick. He wrote: "At first, they didn't really trust my medical arts. But since I raised the chief of Tumleo practically from death with a medical treatment, everyone, young and old, has come and complained of their stomach aches. The chief was down because of severe pneumonia. The big death drum was already struck because he had died once already, as the wisest Kanaks said, when I was called (Kanaks die twice, according to body and spirit). I gave him a powerful medicine that did not fail to work. Today the chief is walking around again and is enjoying life" (Steffen 2020b, 985).

"From 1905 to 1909 SVD Brother Clarentius Petry worked in the first central station on Tumleo Island and from 1909 to 1914 at Alexishafen Hospital as a dentist and handling at the same time the pharmacy, besides his main job as a formator in the central boarding school of the station. When he was transferred to Alexishafen, the dispensary and the central school of the mission were also transferred" (Hagspiel, 1926, 123).

"As there was no other dentist in New Guinea, many private planters and their employees came to Alexishafen to avail themselves of Brother Clarence's services. In 1909–1910 he treated more than fifty such cases; thus, Alexishafen became more and more widely known" (ibid., 124).

Schmidlin (1913, 167) described the early involvement of SVD brothers and SSpS sisters in treating the sick as follows: "Each station has medically trained brothers or sisters with a larger or smaller pharmacy, the most important surgical instruments and the necessary bandages. Thousands of sick and sore natives, often pouring in for hours, receive medical help from the mission." Finally, he added: care for the sick provided by missionaries "assure the love, respect and trust of the natives."

Keeler (1925) depicted mission involvement in carrying for the sick: "There is a quasi-hospital at Doilon [Alexishafen], near Madang, with some twenty beds for natives only. In every mission station—there are eight of them, with the addition of two island stations (Tumleo and Ali)—the Brothers and Sisters labor incessantly to care for the common physical needs of the

<sup>1</sup> All translations from German by J. Kuzma.

natives; and it must be admitted, in spite of their lack of anything like professional medical training, that they have acquired a marvelous efficiency in dealing with common ailments, and in dressing and caring for wounds of all kinds.”

Father Peter Brenner, SVD, (1920, 133) described his experience of serving the sick on Muschu island at a Missionary Conference held in 1919 in Germany: “The healing of a woman and six men who were seriously ill with pneumonia won for me the confidence of the island village of Muschu, one hour by sea from my station, so that the village chiefs repeatedly came to my station and asked me to set up a station and school on their island.”

Fr Brenner also reports on the natives’ health status on Juo island: “In order to put a stop to the great mortality of children, it is necessary to get to know the childhood diseases in order to be able to counter them effectively. Particular attention must be paid to the recovery of youth in schools. How many children suffer from ear, eye and nose ailments, how many heart ailments and fever sufferers are there among them, how often can one see that worms have their home in the sick ears, so it is important to clean them thoroughly and not to turn up your nose. Skin diseases such as ringworm, the kaskas and often many and large wounds all over the body require special and permanent treatment. And then there are broken bones, such as broken arms and legs and dislocation of limbs. How often do they come to the missionary with these sufferings, often with wounds such as lance stabs and arrow wounds, which the natives received in the heat of the fight, and venereal diseases, caused by the Europeans, have been introduced into those areas, and must be dealt with thoroughly and sustainably. The internal diseases and especially pneumonia that occur in almost every prolonged rainy weather, the frequent symptoms of poisoning, be it through bad food, such as fish and other animals, or the bites of poisonous snakes, scorpions and millipedes, also require work and care” (ibid., 135).

Fr Bruno Hagspiel, who accompanied the Superior General of the Divine Word Missionaries, Wilhelm Gier, as secretary in 1923 on his visitation to New Guinea, stated

that SVD missionaries have learned much from the Australian Government’s efficient action aiming to eradicate epidemics and serious diseases. He admitted: “It is astonishing to me how effective they [the missionaries] have been in dealing with the ravages of hook-worm, malaria, small-pox, skin diseases of every sort, and even leprosy. I know that this work is being done and well done...” (Keeler, 1925, 89-90).

Predominantly SSpS sisters as trained nurses and midwives were involved in the direct care for the sick in hospitals at the SVD mission stations. In 1928 the Austrian Brother Gerhoch Eder, a trained nurse, came to be in charge of the hospital in Sek [Alexishafen] (*Word PNG*, Dec 1978/Jan 1979).

During World War II, the Catholic mission lost all nurses. After the war the Alexishafen mission hospital was run by SVD Brother Gerhoch Eder till 1946 when SSpS Sister Balderika Tokker from Holland took over medical work from the brother (Mihalic, 1999, 266).

Brother Fridolin, Joseph Schlierenzauer, SVD, from Switzerland was also involved in work with leprosy patients in the hospital and occupational centre (*Word PNG*, 2001, No. 263). He was also an active member of the Leprosy Control Patrol, which was instrumental in eradicating the disease in that area (*Word PNG*, 1993, No. 174.)

A beautiful example of Br Fridolin’s personal commitment to the health of PNG people was his donating blood to those who needed it; he donated 104 times in 4 countries, 64 times for PNG patients (ibid.).

“In 1935 Brother Gonzaga Schniedergergers, a trained dentist, came to New Guinea and opened a dentist’s studio at Alexishafen and one at Wewak” (Steffen, 2020a, 429). He was serving patients with dental problems in Wirui station, Wewak Diocese (*Word PNG*, 2000, No. 259).

Since the late 1960s, TB (tuberculosis) has become a major health issue in the Middle Sepik. Br Matthew Bouten, SVD, did substantial work with the government on the floating X-ray clinic and organizing hospitalization for about 350 cases sick with TB in Timbunke (Mihalic, 1999, 272). He was also involved in detection and treatment of leprosy cases (*Word PNG*, 2000, No. 259). With the

emergence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in PNG, Br Matthew conducted a wide awareness campaign in schools. Br Matthew became a pioneer in promoting AIDS awareness through numerous educational lectures in schools. He soon trained a team going around and teaching about HIV/AIDS prevention. He was involved in Callan Services caring for the disabled. He personally ran ambulance services providing transport for the sick at all hours of the day or night (*Word PNG*, 2000, No. 260).

In the last two decades, we had two SVD brothers involved in direct care for the sick. One was the Australian brother John Alting, a trained nurse and midwife who worked for a few years in Kunjingini Health Centre and Mingende Rural Hospital and for a short time in

Madang General Hospital. Another brother is Polish SVD Jerzy Kuzma, a trained general surgeon who arrived in PNG in 1997 and is still working there. He started working at Kundiawa

Provincial Hospital and Mingende Mission Hospital.

He took part in a number of medical bush patrols organized by Catholic Health Services in Simbu and Enga Dioceses attending to the sick and performing minor procedures. In 2020 Br Kuzma was transferred to work in Madang Provincial Hospital and to get involved in teaching health students at Divine Word University. In his practice as a general surgeon, he came across many children and young people with limb deformities. He realized that he was not trained to help them by correcting the limb problems and to overcome life-long disabilities. In Australia and PNG, he completed a formal orthopaedic training and after organizing the orthopaedic ward he is now able to restore to health many patients who cannot receive help in other hospitals without orthopaedic facilities. In response to the drastic shortage of doctors in PNG, in 2006 Brother Kuzma became fully involved in leading the new medical school at

Divine Word University. Apart from full engagement in medical education, Br Kuzma is still involved in care for the sick, operating complex orthopaedic cases and treating general patients while simultaneously training medical students. When time allows, he still participates in “medical bush patrols” caring for the very neglected rural population. These days he is taking medical students with him.

Finally, in the direct involvement of SVD missionaries in the ministry of healing, the aspect of spiritual healing of the sick should not be overlooked. This aspect was underlined at the Melbourne World Missionary Conference in 1980: “The Holy Spirit uses the loving service and open welcome extended by the congregation for healing. By listening to one another and bearing one another’s burdens, the

despairing receive hope and the alienated are restored. Those whose wills have been crushed receive new courage in the caring group. Worship and sacramental life is a powerful force for healing the sick—especially the

prayers of intercession, the proclamation of forgiveness (absolution), the laying on of hands and anointing with oil (James 5:14) and participation in the Eucharist.”<sup>2</sup>

To conclude, many early missionaries in PNG, after receiving more or less formal training in medicine, were attending to the sick and suffering. They believed that alleviating suffering was part of their mission following Jesus who healed the sick. The mission of serving the sick continues in the contemporary mission at PNG, however in changed form. These days well trained health professionals are involved in the health ministry and they collaborate with the whole health system in the country.



<sup>2</sup> Section III, The Church Witnesses to the Kingdom, # 19, in: *Commission on World Mission and Evangelism*, 1980, 200.



## **Organisation and Building Infrastructure— Logistic Support to Health Services Development**

### ***Funding Health Development Projects***

The Catholic mission was not only providing mission land for the health facilities but often offering substantial financial support for building mission health centres and hospitals.

“The missionary could commence first evangelization work in unevangelized village societies, and the villagers got the benefit of a typical mission station setup with airstrip, health center, school and mission store” (Steffen, 1996, 241f.).

Many missionaries collected mission funds in their home countries during their holiday and offered a part of this fund for the health projects. This financial support from SVD missionaries to the development of health services continues to these days. Yampu Mission Hospital development in Enga Province can well demonstrate the SVD involvement in building infrastructure in health services.

Overcrowding of the hospital in Wabag with leprosy patients prompted the government to establish a leprosy hospital in Yampu, in 1954. There were 16 wards built of bush materials, each designed for 24 patients. At first, approximately 400 leprosy patients were admitted. Staff consisted of 15 orderlies and 1 medical assistant. Fr Bill Kelly, SVD, resided at the hospital and was doing rounds twice a week to ensure that all patients took their medicine (Kettle, 1979).

In 1955, the Divine Word Missionaries were asked to take over the hospital management and provide the staff. In 1964, the wards made from bush materials were gradually replaced by more permanent buildings. Fr Kelly was involved in building new, more permanent wards. Bishop George Bernarding, SVD, negotiated the purchase of the ground around the hospital so that leprosy patients, staying long in the hospital, far from their homes, were able to plant and grow their own vegetables (Kettle, 1979).

Because leprosy typically causes disabilities, next to the hospital, the centre of occupational therapy has been developed to give the patients

leaving the hospital means to sustain themselves economically (Bus, 1961, 3-4).

SVD brothers were involved both in building and in the work in the leprosarium. In 1967, SVD Brother Arnold Steenbergen from Holland joined Yampu Hospital as the first paramedical worker. He was trained in the Regional Leprosy Unit in Mt Hagen. He was mainly responsible for case-finding foot patrols and the follow-up of discharged patients. He was also providing specially designed sandals to protect the feet of leprosy people (Kettle, 1979).

The work was continued by German SVD Brother Helmut (Otto) Vennebörger who was building more houses for the occupation training centre at Yampu Hospital.

Another Austrian SVD brother, John Gaugg, installed a water supply for the station and hospital. Br Peter Mommers, SVD, provided timber for the hospital buildings and constructed a bridge which allowed car communication and built a hydro-electric power supply (Porterfield, 2005). According to Kruczek (1997), the Catholic Church in Enga has organized three larger health centres: Yampu, Pompabus and Landor. In 1984, Fr Anthony Krajci, SVD, built a house and invited Rosary Sisters nurses to look after the sick in the Health Centre at Landor.

Improved treatment for leprosy led to decreasing numbers of patients and the hospital was changing to serving other health needs of the population. The newer generation of missionaries—Polish Brother Victor Kanarski and German Brother Lothar Goetz—made a thorough-going electrical installation and connected it to the hydro station in Par or alternatively to a generator.

In Wewak Diocese, an important role in developing health service infrastructure was played by Br Matthew Bouten, SVD. He started his activities on Sepik River stations. Initially, he organized funds and building of the Health Centre in Kanengera. After a few years of serving along the Sepik River, he was appointed Diocesan Health Secretary and worked for many years organizing Catholic health services in Wewak diocese. Br Matthew was successful in obtaining funds from overseas donors for a number of health development projects. Among these successful projects we can list providing



ambulances, and a whole batch of wards and nurses' accommodation throughout the diocese (*Word PNG*, 2000, No. 259). As acknowledgement of his achievement in the development of health services, in 1994, Br Matthew was appointed the National Catholic Church Health Secretary and was an active executive of the Churches Medical Council (Mihalic, 1999, 272). The Catholic Church health workers worked harmoniously together with other Christian churches in the Churches Medical Council (Brumm & Mihalic, 1995, 105-107).

In the Archdiocese of Madang, the first note about Alexishafen Hospital was in 1905. "Another example is that the sick around Alexishafen were attended in a small hospital built by the SVD and served by 2 brothers: ... This was a wooden single house which consisted of a dispensary and a room for men and women, an isolation room, a maternity department, a room for the nurses and one for medicine. The sick lay on simple wooden frames, more comfortable than actual beds, due to the great heat; there were also pillows and blankets. [...] Sister Barnaba Zirkel, SSsP, nurse and midwife from Germany, had taken over the management of this hospital from the brothers in 1916" (Stegmaier, 2001, 45-50).

A more detailed report on the medical service provided at Alexishafen was given by Hagspiel (1926, 123-124): "A large hospital was built in 1910, with about twenty beds. This building continued to serve its purpose until 1912, when the present well-equipped hospital was erected. Meanwhile, the personnel had so greatly increased (especially as a result of the rice plantation) that the expansion of its accommodations to one hundred beds was none too great. Besides the large general ward, the hospital contains a special ward for the seriously ill, a room for the attendant, a bathroom, the dispensary with operating-hall, and the dental department and X-Ray studio."

The first government report that the mission in Alexishafen had a hospital was in 1912. In 1916 a permanent hospital was built which consisted of women's and men's wards, an isolation ward, dispensary and nurses' room. In 1967 the new hospital at Alexishafen was built with 4 wards, each containing 8 beds. In 1990 a special maternity wing was developed (Mihalic, 1999).

These days further development and upgrading of the Alexishafen Mission Hospital continues. The PNG Bishops' Conference, through the arrangement by Fr Victor Roche, SVD, has provided funds for the renovation and extension of the labour ward. Further, a Polish brother, Doctor Jerzy Kuzma, SVD, arranged the project for the development of Alexishafen Hospital. Engaging with numerous sponsors, he has organized a fully equipped operating theatre and is finalizing the establishment of radiological services at Alexishafen Heart of Mary Health Centre. He also arranged two large donations of medical furniture and medical equipment from Australia and Poland. In addition, Br Kuzma, who is practicing as a general and orthopaedic surgeon, with the support from various overseas sponsors, established a new orthopaedic ward at the government Provincial Hospital in Madang. Through various developmental projects, the orthopaedic ward has become well-equipped with basic instruments and materials which enabled Br Kuzma to provide an adequate orthopaedic care and save the sick from life-long disability.

Another illustration of SVD missionaries' involvement in raising funds for health services is Fr Adam Sroka, SVD, who during holiday time initiated a small-scale project "Children helping children." At his home parish in Poland, children going to first communion organized a collection for the children's ward at Kunjingini Mission Hospital. With these funds the paediatric ward was renovated. An alternative example of continuous financial support to the health care development is the allocation of SVD funds for the poor for building a new Health Centre in Pompabus in Enga Province.

While the author is missing an adequate account of all projects in health development which were organized and sponsored by missionaries, the examples given aimed to illustrate the financial commitment of SVD missionaries to development projects upgrading health services for local people.

### ***Financial Support in Health Service Operation***

In the early organisation of mission stations, the church health facility was a part of the whole station. It means that a lot of expenses were shared and actually covered by the church. Enough to list here the cost of the fuel for the

generator, combined transport of supplies and the personnel, carrying out maintenance and repairs, etc.

Wölfel (1966) records an example of missionary practice: “The income from the mission store was reinvested in the development of the mission schools and rural health centers....”

When financial responsibilities for church health were taken over by the government, the health facilities still had to pay for the services of diocesan workers, however, they have timely service often at a reduced “mission” price. Despite this financial separation between diocese and health services, many missionaries use part of the mission funds obtained from their home countries to cover some of the most urgent running expenses of church health services. For instance, the parish priest in Kunjingini, Fr Sroka reported allocating a part of mission funds for the purchase of medicine needed in the mission hospital.

In the early days, the mission was also responsible for recruiting and organizing the transport of overseas nurses and volunteers, and taking care of their salaries. Later, after the agreement between the state and church health services, the state took over the responsibility for health workers’ wages and operational expenses. However, given that state financing is often inadequate to the needed expenditure of the health sector there is still a need to financially support church health services.

### ***Transport Assistance***

Mission stations are usually equipped with transport means, whether it was a car or a boat with engine. A decade or two ago, the mission vehicle could be the only one in the whole area. Many SVD priests and brothers, especially those working in very remote places, tell numerous stories about saving sick patients by transporting them in time to health facilities. There is no good record of the number of lives saved due to being delivered to a health facility by mission transport. On top of transport offered to medical emergencies, pastoral patrols to very remote villages were normally combined with medical patrols where the parish or diocese covered the transport cost also for health workers. Also, on numerous occasions, the transport of supplies to the mission station

offered free transport to the health staff and medical and other supplies to health facilities. One of the pioneers of air transport, Bishop Leo Arkfeld, SVD, was also transporting the sick when need arose.

A good example of SVD missionaries’ involvement in transport of the sick could be Br Matthew who was successful in obtaining funds from overseas donors for the fleet of ambulances (*Word PNG*, 2000, No. 259). Moreover, he personally ran ambulance services providing transport to the sick at all hours of the day or night (*Word PNG*, 2000, No. 260). Another more contemporary report of the mission commitment to assist in the transport of the sick could be the parish priest from Amboin, Fr Piotr Wasko, SVD. On the way back from patrol, he was often taking up to 10 sick people to Timbunke Mission Hospital on his large canoe with motor.

### ***Assistance in Maintenance of Health Facilities***

In earlier years, the SVD mission had brothers specialised in various trades, able to offer both building and maintenance to facilities. Church health facilities many times benefited from SVD brothers and priests offering free or low-price maintenance to the health facilities. For instance, Fr Adam Sroka on a few occasions helped in plumbing repair in Timbunke and Kunjingini mission hospitals, as well as being a volunteer to help paint the rooms. Br Helmut (Otto) Vennebörger, a builder, Br Hubert (Wendalinus) Frese, a smith and mechanic, and Br Wiktor Kanarski, an electrotechnician and computer specialist, were always ready to offer their timely help to repair and maintain catholic church health facilities in the highland provinces. A group of SVD brothers, including Br Hermann Specht (electrician), Br John Gaugg (plumber) and Br Sjaak Swinkels (builder) were involved in the maintenance work of mission facilities in Wewak diocese. At the same time these brothers were taking care of the health facilities for free or giving a good mission discount for their work.

### ***Engagement in Training Local Health Workers (Health Education)***

Aside from the support offered to the working health staff, SVD missionaries since the beginning of mission were deeply involved in

education of PNG people. This commitment to education encompasses also the education of health workers. The SVD province has organised a special scholarship for catholic students from poor families. Already a few health students have benefited from this program. I assume there was much unrecorded private support from the SVD missionaries for the school fees and education of health workers. An example I came across was the providing of funds by the priest of Kunjingini parish for a CHW (Community Health Worker) working at the Kunjingini Catholic Health Centre to receive training in early diagnosis of TB and malaria.

A substantial contribution to training all cadres of health workers has been made by the Divine Word University founded and governed by the SVD and SSpS. Beginning with launching the health management and physiotherapy programs, then taking over from the Government the training of Health Extension Officers and Environmental Health Officers. In recent years a Medical School with the MBBS program training future doctors were opened, and a postgraduate program in Public Health and a degree in Health Management were commenced. DWU also amalgamated two schools of nursing in Rabaul and Wewak and affiliated the Lutheran School of Nursing (LSON) in Madang for some years, providing the amalgamated and affiliated schools with academic quality procedures and opportunities for staff training and development.

All this development in training health workers was initiated and supported by Fr Jan Czuba, SVD, who held the President's office at DWU. Also, Br Jerzy Kuzma, SVD, who, for his academic achievements and publications, has been appointed Professor of Surgery, during his 22 years of work at DWU contributed markedly to the development of health programs. Appointed as the Head of the Medical Department, Br Kuzma played a substantial role in the progress of a Medical School at DWU. In addition, Br Kuzma successfully obtained a large scholarship program for 200 health students, allowing academically promising students, especially from poor rural families, to continue health education.

### ***Spiritual Support for Health Workers***

The parish priest, where a mission health facility was located, typically extended special spiritual care for health church workers. Fr Adam Sroka, SVD, recalled that when he was responsible for the Timbunke parish he every year organized a 5-day retreat for nurses and a few times a year, a recollection day. Similar pastoral care to health workers was offered in Yampu by Fr Theo Tersteeg, SVD, and in Simbu Diocese by Fr Ryszard Wajda, SVD.

Since nurses work in the context of life and death, they were encouraged by priests to administer the sacrament of baptism in the situation of imminent child death. The administration of the sacrament naturally required catholic parents' consent. Parish priest Fr Sroka in Kunjingini offered instruction to nurses how to administer the sacrament of baptism in case of emergency. Additionally, according to his opinion, the parish priest with his established well-respected position in the community, plays an important role in conflict resolution. Resolving conflicts peacefully at various levels, such as within health workers' families, between the health staff, between health centre staff and the community, was one of the important factors contributing to undisrupted church health services development.

Following the example of Jesus who "took pity on the suffering" and was healing the sick, early SVD missionaries to PNG were committed to alleviating the suffering of the sick in direct care or indirect support for health services development. The current mission in PNG continues to be sensitive to the health needs especially of marginalized groups such as the neglected rural population or ostracized HIV/AIDS patients. With the changing face of PNG society, health needs and challenges are different from those in the early days of mission in PNG. Yet, the SVD spirituality of prophetic dialogue with the world keeps our eyes open to the needs of people, including their health needs. The response to the spiritual and holistic development of people remains at the heart of our mission.

## The Challenge of *Fratelli Tutti* to the Indian Context

### Introduction

The topic of challenges to the Indian context, arguably, is very complex in as much as every number of the Encyclical offers a challenge to the Indian context. This article, however, limits itself to church's relation to other religions in the light of the Encyclical's invitation to, 'fraternity and social friendship.' The Pope reminds the church that its service is not one of waging a war of words aimed at imposing doctrines; but simply spreading the love of God (FT 4). In as much as fraternity and social friendship has a universal scope, it is open to the followers of every religion as well. It is an invitation "to dialogue among all people of good will" (FT 6). The vision of creating "a single human family" cannot be left to any one religion (FT 8), but requires the collaboration of all, as fellow pilgrims.

### 1. The Indian Context

India has earned a name for its deeply religious spirit and has the first written religious Scriptures in as much as the Babylonian texts like Gilgamesh, though more than 4000 years old, are largely of socio-political nature. Similarly, despite the tension between the followers of Hinduism and Buddhism in the early stages, leading to the near disappearance of Buddhism from the land of its origin, traditionally India is taken to be a religiously tolerant nation that welcomed the followers of foreign religions like Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam<sup>1</sup>. India is home to most religions like Primal religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam and Sikhism. Traditionally these religions coexisted peacefully, until the arrival of the Moguls and western Christian missionaries.

Today religious violence is a major phenomenon of Indian society. In the past such conflicts were largely between the Hindus and the Muslims, to a great extent, due to the very nature of these religions, with regard to beliefs and practices, but got aggravated by the expansion work of the Muslims. In recent times the Hindu opposition to religious conversion has been extended to Christians as well leading to many untoward instances, including the killing of several Christians and the destruction of numerous churches.

Enlightened Hindus would appreciate the Christian influence in reforming Hinduism from within, to make it more extroverted, leading to reforms like the abolition or mitigation of many of the traditional practices such as the widow-burning (*sati*) or the caste system. One cannot be blind to the Christian impact on the making of the Constitutions of the Republic of India. I am inclined to suggest this catalytic role, along with the educational and other social outreaches, as the greatest service that Christianity has imparted to the Indian society.

On the other hand, Christians, unintentionally, though, have contributed to the current religious violence in India. Though difficult for Christians to grasp, most Hindus would recon the Christian conversion work as a by-product of the colonial conquest and as an invasion on the majority community. In the same vein, inadmissible though, many Hindus take it for granted that the followers of the tribal religions in India are part of Hinduism. There are also sections within the majority community that would be happier if the traditionally weaker sections of the Indian society are left at that situation as it would offer better chances of exploiting them in different ways. The Christian empowerment projects runs counter to such vested interests.

Well-known as it is, India traditionally is esteemed to be a spiritual nation, home of ancient religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and

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<sup>1</sup> Through the Arab traders Islam came to the southern coasts of India already from its early history.



Jainism with written scriptures. No wonder that the late Pope Paul VI during his visit to Bombay in December 1964 qualified India as a nation that sought God with relentless desire, in deep meditation and silence and in hymns of fervent prayer (AAS, 1964: 1032). All this makes Francis' proposal of making Religions at the service of Fraternity in the world, as the greatest challenge that the Encyclical offers to the Indian church. It calls for a paradigm shift in Church's understanding of its service in India, always centred on the kingdom-ministry of Jesus.

## 2. The Papal Call

Out of conviction that all human beings are brothers and sisters (FT 128), and from the need to think of ourselves more and more as a single family dwelling in a common home (FT 17), and concerned about the prevalence of a "throwaway" world that readily approves that part of the human family can be sacrificed for the sake of others considered worthy of a carefree existence (FT 18), and at the expense of the equal dignity of all human beings, the Pope calls all to a shared passion to create a community of belonging and solidarity.

Approvingly quoting the Bishops of India, "The goal of dialogue is to establish friendship, peace and harmony, and to share spiritual and moral values and experiences in a spirit of truth and love" (CBCI, 2016) the Encyclical invites all to a dialogue between the followers of different religions to build fraternity and defend justice in society (FT 271). Believers in different religions are open to the Father of all, the basis of human fraternity and the transcendent dignity of the human person, who as the visible image of the invisible God, is therefore, the subject of rights that no one may violate.

The followers of different religions know how their witness to God with a sincere heart, can enrich each other, as fellow pilgrims. The trampling of the dignity of fellow human beings and the violation of their rights is the result of removing God from one's vision (FT 273). Hinduism teaches how God is the indweller of all human beings. If so, considering another person as ritually impure is an insult to the God in whom one believes and worships. In the same vein, gender discrimination too goes counter to the faith in the one God. It flows from a desensitized human conscience, distanced from

religious values (FT 275). Interreligious dialogue in this context involves a concern for integral human development. Church's charitable and educational activities have a public role, for the advancement of humanity and of universal fraternity. The Church as a family among families, leaves home and the places of worship "in order to accompany life, to sustain hope, to be the sign of unity ... to build bridges, to break down walls, to sow seeds of reconciliation" (FT 276).

Christians, while esteeming the ways in which God works in other religions and having high regard for the manner of life and conduct of the followers of other religions, must be resonating with the compassion and the tender love with a capacity for reconciliation, springing from the Gospel (FT 277).

## 3. Perception of other Religions from the Biblical Perspective

The initial openness of Christians towards other religions in modern times can be described as a type of 'democratic thinking', i.e., since these religions are active Christians have to accept them, tolerate them and even enter into dialogue with them. Rarely was it the result of a biblical analysis to situate them from the biblical perspective.

Basic to the Christian experience of God in the Bible is that God is one who reaches out to all, especially the suffering and the poor, those on the margin. Thus, the first experience of the Hebrew community in Egypt is a God who tells them through Moses that God has seen their affliction and heard their cry (Ex 3:7). The very nature of God as compassion, love, is to reach out as described in the book of Genesis. Creation is the expression of this reaching out of that desire in God (*bereshit*=beginning, desire) (Gen 1:1). All human beings are created in God's image (Gen 1:26) and with whom God entered into a covenant relationship (Gen 9:9). Later in the New Testament, evangelist John will underline how all humans are created and *enlightened* by God's creative Word (1.1-4; 9).

From this biblical declaration it follows that there is no justification for the Christian claims of exclusive knowledge of God or for a distinction between natural and supernatural revelation. All religious experience anywhere in the world is the result of this divine initiative.

This does not prejudice the divine call of individuals or peoples for a special service. Abraham is called to be a blessing to all humans (Gen 12:3). God makes a particular covenant with Israel so that for God it will be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19: 6), i.e., as a priestly and holy people they will be a light to the rest of the nations of the world (Is 42:6; 49:6).

This particular call is repeated in the New Testament as well when the Word Incarnate creates a new community (Mk 3:14 par) and tells it that this community is to be a light to the world (Mt 5:13-14). It may be noted that Jesus of Nazareth, as God’s Word Incarnate (Lk 1:35), came from God whom no one ever had seen, to make him known (Jn 1:38; 12:45; 14:9) through his ministry culminating on the death on the cross and resurrection. He creates the new community as the sacrament, servant of the Kingdom, the focus of his ministry, through which he manifested the Father and Father’s love and Father’s nature.

Though all people receive the divine revelation through the Word, followers of other religions cannot justifiably be described as ‘anonymous Christians,’ in so far as the Word is made Christ, in the light of his incarnation, ministry and death, by God by raising him from the dead (Act 2:22-33). Only the companions of the Word Incarnate are Christians, followers of the Way (Act 11:26), called precisely for continuing the ministry of the Lord.

The Christian approach to the followers of other religions has to be anchored on this biblical realism and not because of a sense of helplessness as though nothing else is possible, nor because of the revival or growth, often associated with aggressive nationalism, of these religions.

#### **4. A Call to Interreligious Dialogue**

It was pointed out earlier how the nature of God manifested in the Bible is that of self-reaching out. This is what Christians have experienced in Jesus of Nazareth, ever reaching out to the neighbour, whether sick, hungry, sinful, demon-possessed, or the marginalized due their profession or for whatever reasons. This reaching out, characterized as the proclamation of the Kingdom, along with the universal revelation, impels Christians to enter into

interreligious dialogue (IRD) by reaching out to the followers of these religions. Dialogue is “approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground” (FT 198).

IRD is not an entity but a process of becoming. It is a process of becoming a community of persons, respectful and respecting, transforming and transformed, renewing and renewed. This allows IRD to have a certain amount of spontaneity as well as open-endedness. It acknowledges the need to turn to each other and together to the ground of our being, to the goal of our existence. Thus, it is permeated by a sense of the radical Transcendence and at the same time, down to earth immanence in so far as it is primarily directed to the horizontal level, in terms of understanding and acceptance of each other and together to the marginalized of the society. It is through and through guided by the mandate to “seek first the divine reign” (Mt 6:33). IRD is a cooperative and constructive interaction among people belonging to different religious traditions (Muck, 2016: 8) leading to communion, inclusive of all.

IRD as a religious experience, is a symbol of the kingdom to which we are pilgrimaging: it is a “diffused symbol” (Arbuckle, 2010: 25). Its meaning depends on the different contexts of the dialogue process: faith, religion, and commitment to transformation:

After all, symbol is an embodiment of meaning, enabling humans to communicate, perpetuate and develop a vision of human life.

Symbol has the innate ability to make us feel ‘at home’. At the same time, by the same logic, it invites us to enter into the world of the symbols of the other and this is the mystery of, the dynamic of IRD, ushering in the gifts of different faiths that will serve as a reservoir of common pilgrimage - the reality of IRD.

A symbol is any reality that by its very dynamism or power leads to another deeper reality through a sharing in the dynamism that the symbol itself offers (and merely by verbal or additional explanations (Arbuckle, 2010: 25).

A good many of modern problems and conflicts, strangely though, have religion at their root (Sacks, 2016: 99), whether it is the Arab-Israel conflict, conflicts in the Middle East and Syria, the Kashmir problem, Indonesian conflicts, the

conflicts in the southern Philippines and many others. In theory at least, all religions have the inbuilt theological underpinning for mutual understanding and collaboration.

The belief in the *antaryamin* in Hinduism<sup>2</sup>, i.e., the Divine nature making a self-surrender to God<sup>3</sup>, the Buddhist teaching of universal compassion, the Christian call to love and care for the neighbour, the basic understanding of harmony in the Chinese and Confucian religions, the understanding of Yahweh, the creator of all and as the Lord of History in Judaism, the vision of the salvation of the universe as understood by the primal religions, are all inviting religions to come closer and to collaborate, rather than to compete and combat with each other. Right relationship with neighbours is the focus of all religions. This is the challenge of Inter Religious Dialogue. Christians in particular, by their call to witness to the coming of the divine reign in Jesus Christ, the Incarnation of the *extensio Dei* (Divine self-reaching out), are called to IRD.

Prophet Isaiah's vision described in Is 6:1-8, reminds us how our history, our experience of God, does not begin with us. The history of all people of God is part of our intimate relationship with God. "All the earth is filled with his glory" (Is 6:3). Isaiah's vision tells us also that no one, not even Isaiah or Moses, can have a total vision of the divine and this is an invitation for religions to touch the Holy as experienced in the other, to be enriched by the other. God's dialogue with humans does not begin with any particular religion but with creation. This divine initiative coupled with the universal covenant God made with humans (Gen 9:9-17), challenges Christians to look into what they have in common with others, rather than what differentiates them from others.

It has to be acknowledged also how all religions in essence advocate peace, love, unity and tolerance, which the colonial Christianity, due to a narrow missionary zeal, overlooked. Equally, there is no room to compare religions in order to establish one's own superiority. As

the Benedictine nun and author, Joan Chittister, has underlined no people is unique in an absolute sense, in so far as anything in human condition is common to all. "And all of these peoples have grappled with the same kinds of questions and have arrived at their own answers" (Chittister, 2007: xi). What is important is to realize how each religion has a particular service to render to humanity, and ask how together we can usher in a superior quality of human existence. As far as the Christians are concerned this uniqueness is the service to the Kingdom.

Already the Old Testament paves the way for inter religious understanding leading to enrichment of one's religion. The Babylonian exile brought Israel into contact with the leading religion of the Babylonian world, Zoroastrianism and to be enriched by it, in the understanding God. We come across strict monotheism in the Bible only towards the end of the exile (Is 45:18) though there was already the monolatry. The Zoroastrian understanding of the two ages facilitated the belief in the idea of resurrection of the dead. Sean Freyne writes: "The doctrine of the two ages is the theological underpinning for the belief in the idea of the resurrection of the dead - a doctrine that finds its first unequivocal expression in Daniel: 12:2-3" (Sean, 1983: 95). Judaism's adaptation to a life without the temple through the institution of the synagogue, too, results from the Zoroastrians who did not have one central temple but a temple where a community existed.<sup>4</sup>

In the gospels, as we have seen already, Jesus is not an advocate of a religion as much as a quality of life based on love and mercy. The early Christians were quite creative in their openness and sensitivity to the religious world of the times manifested in doing away with circumcision (Acts 15), in the theological interpretation of Jesus as the Lord rather than as Christ/Messiah (Acts 11:20 in contrast to Acts

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<sup>2</sup> According to Rg Veda Reality is one but sages name it differently (*ekam sat: vipra bahudah vdanti*) (Rg 1.164.46)

<sup>3</sup> This cannot justify the killing of a fellow human being as an unbeliever!

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<sup>4</sup> Though one hardly comes across scholarly literature stating that the synagogue worship rose due to the influence of Zoroastrianism, scholars like Martin A. Cohen do recognize how the synagogue originated during the Babylonian captivity in the 6th century BCE (Cf. Cohen, 1987: 209-218), and this in turn supports Freyne Sean's position that the Jewish synagogue came into being under the influence of Zoroastrianism (Sean, 1983: 96).

9:22), and in similar theological and practical developments.

### **5. *Fratelli Tutti*, a Retrieval of the Gospel Path for Asia**

The Encyclical's greatest challenge to Indian church is IRD as the service of the divine reign. It has to move away from any triumphalism and behaviour to become credible by collaborating with other religions as well as with the poor and marginalized and, thus, to decolonize the contours of its theology.

The gospels indicate how the religious methodology of Jesus was not so much that of founding a new religion as much as reforming the Judaism of his times through a hermeneutical transformation based on love and compassion. Jesus was a faithful Jew who died as a prophet in Jerusalem, "but God raised him up" (Act 2:24) and "has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Act 2:36).

The encyclical unfolds that spirit and invites the church in India/Asia to be an agent of such a transformation through dialogue. The Christian presence in Asia is not for the sake of a radical altering of the religious map of Asia by displacing the age-old religions of Asia but to transform the human society through dialogue into a genuine fraternal community of love - *Fratelli Tutti*. This is in keeping with the spirit of Vatican II whose two most important contributions were the articulation of Church's relation to the modern world and to other religions.

Indian reality, in general, can be described as the plurality of religions, cultural diversity and of the many poor. Despite the gigantic stride democracy has made in India, social democracy still remains a far cry. Caste system in different hues and economic disempowerment have anchored a hierarchical structure that ensures the dominance of the powerful, pushing the powerless to the margins. Jesus' invitation to be converted in the context of the arrival of the Kingdom (Mk 1:14), remains ever urgent for the Asian context. In practice, however, this can be done only with the collaboration of all the religions. This makes the Encyclical's demand for dialogue with the followers of the religions vital for the Indian church so that it be faithful to its Lord.

In principle, at least, all Asian religions subscribe to harmony as an Asian value. As Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia* described, "complementarity in harmony" (FT 2) can be characterised as the evangelical norm for Asia. Obviously, love is the foundational value for the Christian community, spelt, out as the existential practice of the principle, *Fratelli Tutti*. Thus, the Encyclical goes a long way in helping Indian church to discharge its service of becoming a light (Mt 5:14) in Indian society.

In India the frontiers of the Kingdom and non-Kingdom lie not between the church and other religions, but between the margins and centre of the of Indian society, the centre understood as those with whom the decision-making power is vested. Advocacy in dialogue assumes an irreplaceable role in this circumstance. What best the church can offer in this unenviable situation of subverting the values of justice, equality and genuine freedom, is the spread of divine goodness and communion leading to acceptance and sharing, rendering each his/her due. The naming of that social repentance is the motto: *Fratelli Tutti!*

It is the expression of repentance in the context of exclusion and exploitation, ushering in a "Cosmotheandric"<sup>5</sup> communion. The cosmotheandropic vision, with its emphasis on trusting the other, is the end-product of dialogue in so far as dialogue is a meeting of persons. It is an exercise of faith, hope and love: "faith in the ever-inexhaustible mystery beyond the reach of objective knowledge." (Panikkar, 1979: 6). One's eschatological hope for the world enters the heart of the dialogue overriding any fear or prejudice. It is love that impels us towards our fellow human beings. Dialogue is a 'cosmic' confidence in so far as we place the trust ultimately not in humans but in the Ultimate Reality.

Humans are so made that they cannot live in isolation or find their fulfilment except in the sincere gift of self to another. Nor can humans find the true beauty of life without relating to others. Largely, this is true of religions as well

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<sup>5</sup> The expression was used by R. Panikkar, to mean the communion between God, humans and the world. See Panikkar, 1993: 55. I prefer to speak of cosmotheandropic experience, as Andros *refers to man while* Andropos *is* inclusive of man and woman.



in so far as religions are practiced by humans. This implies a “dialogical dialogue,” that is to say, an in-depth experience of the spiritual experience of the other. As we said, it is an experience of faith, hope and love, leading to the primordial interconnectedness of all humans (Panikkar, 1993: 77).

This, in turn, leads us to the fact that Christianity cannot be identified with rituals, isolated from the lived experience of those participating in the ritual. Their historical experience cannot be separated from the rituals. The compassion and true knowledge of God is the defining element of the Christian existence and they form the substratum of any Christian practice. The Encyclical is inviting Catholics to this fundamental principle of Christian life, through the concept of borderless fraternity. In the Asian context the concept of a borderless fraternity cannot be isolated from justice to the margins that requires the collaboration of the followers of all Asian religions. Inter religious dialogue does not remain an ivory tower but an expression of the option for the poor.

Historically and biblically speaking, human experience is one of plurality in every respect, including that of religions. There is nothing to suggest that the divine plan is that of bringing all humans under any one particular religious umbrella, though both the Old Testament (Exo 19:5-6) and the New Testament (Mt 5:14-15) tells of the creation of a people as light to the rest of humanity.

Both the Encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, and the Indian Bishops hold out the cause of universal fraternity as the Church’s service to the modern world. In this service IRD with its various shades, can go a long way. IRD can lead the participants to an inter-subjective field of communication orienting to an ever-open horizon of communion. It is both a gift and a task in so far as the ever-open horizon includes also the excluded ones, the visible symbols of the totally Other, the common ground of IRD.

Dialogue is an event in history, with the inter-subjective realm of encounter, meeting the ‘other,’ without any intention of putting fences around the other, but allowing the possibility to be open to the boundless horizon of what God is doing in the world. It is a universe of divine love, divine catholicity without exclusion, the all-inclusive Other. This is the miracle of IRD: a

new awareness of the all-inclusive Other. Equally, it is the awareness of the truth *Fratelli Tutti*!

Addressing the Plenary Assembly of the Secretariat for non-Christians, Pope John Paul II on March 3, 1984 said: “Dialogue is fundamental for the Church, which is called to collaborate in God’s plan with its method of presence, respect, and love towards all persons (cf. *Ad Gentes* 10-12; *Ecclesiam Suam* 41-42; *Redemptoris Hominis* 11-12). ... For the Church, dialogue is based on the very life of God, one and triune God is the Father of the entire human family; Christ has joined every person to himself (RH 19); the Spirit works in each individual; therefore dialogue is also based on love for the human person as such, who is primary and fundamental way of the Church (RH 14), and on the bond existing between culture and the religions which people profess” (John Paul II, 1984: 2).

The fruit of that 1984 Plenary Assembly, the document *Dialogue and Proclamation*, declared: “The Church has the duty of discovering and bringing to light and fullness all the richness which the Father has hidden in creation and history, not only to celebrate the glory of God in its liturgy but also to promote among all humankind the movement of the gifts of the Father” (DP 22). Obviously, promoting the truth, *Fratelli Tutti*, through inter religious dialogue, is a fruition of that recommendation.

An inter religious consultation, jointly organized by the Pontifical Council for Inter religious dialogue and the Office of Inter Religious Dialogue of the World Council of Churches, May 12- 16, 2006, stated: “All of us believe that religions should be a source of uniting and ennobling of humans, understood and practiced in the light of the core principles and ideals of each of our faiths, can be a reliable guide to meeting the many challenges before humanity.” The principle *Fratelli Tutti* is such a core ideal and at the same time prepares the way for the universal practice of the respect for the dignity of the human person and the ensuing human rights.

The end product of such a dialogue is, what *Fratelli Tutti* described in terms of “a polyhedron whose different sides form a variegated unity, in which the whole is greater than any part” (FT 215). The differences are

complementary, rather than conflicting, enriching reciprocally, illumining one another, even amid disagreements and reservations (FT 215). Followers of each religion can learn something from the other. All religions stand in need of conversion and growth, in so far as religion, though based on a divine experience, is a human reality. This makes IRD a constant aspiration and style of life for the Indian church.

### Conclusion

The practical emphasis the Pope lays on dialogue can hardly be exaggerated. “Let us arm our children with the weapons of dialogue! Let us teach them to fight the good fight of the culture of encounter,” admonishes Francis (FT 217). This can lead to the “joy of recognizing others, with their right to be themselves” (FT 218). The significance of such an admonition for the Indian society can be understood in the context of constant religious conflicts, not to speak of religious persecution and discrimination, breeding violence and intolerance towards those who are different. This can be overcome only through a culture of dialogue and mutual recognition.

To live by the call of *Fratelli Tutti*, one needs to have a prophetic imagination that can hold together God’s values and the existing reality, always reducing the gap between the two. In contrast to the Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* that outlined a programme for the Church in its life and mission and *Laudato Si’* that gave the world a programme for caring for the environment, the Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* gives to the entire humanity a programme to build a new and inclusive world of fraternity and friendship among all, where all can live in peace and harmony and where the rights of all are respected and accepted. In this sense the Encyclical is a spelling out of the Kingdom prayer, the Our Father. This is the vision guiding inter religious dialogue that the church in India pursues.

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Photos from SEDOS Christmas Party

## **Father Damien De Veuster (1840-1889)**

### **A Missionary in and of the Periphery**

#### **From early childhood towards priesthood.**

On 3 January 1840, the seventh child of the De Veuster family was born in the Brabant village of Tremelo in Belgium. The father, Frans, was a corn merchant, and mother Cato took care of the family. Frans was a hard-working man, and Cato, a rather self-centred woman. This seventh child was named Joseph. He went to school in the nearby village of Werchter and was known as a healthy countryside boy. Still very young he learnt what suffering was like. In 1847, his younger sister died of cholera, and in 1854 another sister, Eugenie, died. She was a nun at the convent of Uden. He also learnt how God could take possession of a person's soul, because another sister, Pauline, left to take the place of her deceased sister, and his brother August, joined the congregation of Picpus in Louvain. He dreamt of becoming a missionary. Joseph was not an easy child. He was stubborn and sometimes a bit quick-tempered. He was also a bit of a daredevil. One day he tried to jump on a fast-moving cart, but he missed, fell and got hit by one of the wheels, causing him to have a painful back and an eye injury that would never really heal.

After primary school his parents wanted him to stay home and help with business. But on his explicit request, and inspired by the example of his brother August, who studied in Louvain, he was allowed to go to Braine-Le-Compte, to the 'Ecole Commerciale' ('School of Commerce'). That education would have a positive influence on his later career, he claimed. It proved a tough period, for Joseph did not speak a single word of French. But he demonstrated what a stubborn Fleming was capable of, because in no less than a year he was at the same level as the others. He spent the summer of 1858 in Louvain with his brother August, who had in the meantime taken the habit as Brother Pamphile. There he learned all about convent life, and at the beginning of 1859, he decided to become a Father of the

Holy Hearts, a Picpus as well. He chose Damien for religious name, and his first idea was to become a brother, and as a working brother, to leave for the missions in the company of his brother. In June 1860, he was sent to Paris to become priest after all. Once again, his great capacity for work had vanquished: through self-study he had learnt Latin and thus made up for his lag in development. In Paris he was often the victim of insults, but Damien did not really mind or even take notice of it. But he was nevertheless glad to be able to return to Louvain in 1861, and to accompany his brother once again. The latter was ordained priest on 28 February 1863, which resulted in a great family celebration. It was also a moment of 'goodbyes', because Father Pamphile was to leave for Hawaii as missionary. Due to an acute typhoid infection, however, he was forced to stay at home. Damien, who had in the meantime been ordained minor religious orders, asked the general superior if he could leave instead of his brother. After a first refusal, he eventually got the permission. On 29 October 1863, Damien left Paris to take the boat to Hawaii in Bremen on 8 November. The journey took a little less than 5 months and on 19 March 1864, the feast of Damien's patron, Saint Joseph, he reached Honolulu. Before his departure, he had had himself photographed posing as his example, Saint Francis Xavier, missionary in India.

#### **On his way to become a missionary.**

The first days in Honolulu, Damien got acquainted with Msgr. Maigret who quickly saw through him, concluding that Damien was a good man. On 20 May 1864, Damien was ordained priest, and immediately appointed priest responsible for the district Puna on the Great Island. He learned the language very quickly, the integration went smoothly, and he learned to eat the semolina with his hands. He started the struggle against idolatry, and especially against the goddess Pele, who was idolised by the indigenous people. In this region



with its active volcanoes people often saw a connection with their gods. In 1865, Damien moved to the northern side of the island, where he became responsible for the Kahola district. For nine years he gave himself entirely to the people, and he became known as the carpenter-priest who built no less than 8 churches. Meanwhile, he had also discovered this horrible disease that threatened the population, leprosy. In July 1865, the island's Health Council bought a piece of land on a peninsula on the northern side of the island Molokai. This part of the island was separated from the rest by an enormous mountain wall, turning the peninsula into a natural prison. Lepers were brought there, and were not allowed to ever leave the island again. The first 12 lepers left on 6 January 1866, and very quickly they became nature's playthings. Heavy storms ruined the roofs of their houses, and because of their handicap the lepers were incapable of repairing them. It was the start of a lot of misery.

Damien also had problems. It was hard work, and his urge to convert people did not have the expected results, which made him very depressed on regular occasions. There was also the very strong competition with the Protestants who were also setting everything to work to convert as many people as possible. The good relationship with Bishop Maigret was a source of support though. When the latter suggested in 1873 to send a priest to the lepers, and to replace him every three months, Damien was immediately prepared to leave. The stories about the lepers' lives were becoming ever more widespread, and even the press had reported several times on the promiscuity that was common among the sick on the island, those rejected by society.

### **To the real periphery of existing.**

On Friday, 9 May 1873, Damien took the boat to Molokai, accompanied by the Bishop. The latter advised him not to eat with the lepers, not to touch them and never to ride in their saddle. Damien promised that he would follow those instructions, but realised that it would be most difficult to be convincing as these people's priest if he were indeed to follow those instructions. They arrived in Kalawao the following day, and read mass together. After a

visit to the lepers' village Bishop Maigret left, leaving Damien behind all by himself. A new period in his life had now started.

Very quickly, the inhabitants started calling him 'Makua Kamiano'. The first days he slept in the open air under a pandanus. He immediately started with the construction of a water pipeline to the central dispensary, and the construction of a fence around the graveyard to stop wild boars from digging up and eating the bodies, buried in shallow graves. He learnt about more and more injustices and inhumane situations, like e.g. the terminally ill having to go to an isolated spot in order to die there in complete solitude. He therefore started distributing information, which resulted in a conflict with the Health Council.

When he returned to Honolulu for the first time in July in order to regain some strength, he made the firm decision to return to his people. However, the Health Council made its rules stricter, and decided that Damien had to make a choice, either stay in Honolulu, or go back to the leprosy colony and stay there definitively. They claimed that the risk of contamination was too high, if Damien were to travel back and forth between Honolulu and Molokai. Silently, they hoped to get rid of that annoying priest. But Damien, stubborn as he was, obtained the permission of his superiors to return and to stay. Back at the leper colony, Damien started his homily with the words, "We, lepers." He explained to the people that as from now, he would be one of theirs, and that he felt he was an exile just like them. He also made the decision to eat from the same pot as the lepers, and to share the pipe with them. A well-known anecdote is that Father Damien wanted to confess, but not receive permission to board the ship. So, he was forced to confess in public to a priest leaning over the rail.

Damien became a great defender of the lepers, and stepped on many people's toes. Jealousy was growing, especially when his begging-letters raised considerable sums of money. He struggled against the moral corruption that ruled among the lepers as a result of their hopeless situation. Another serious problem was alcoholism. He also tried to organise the community, founded a brass band, and even organised horse races.



In February 1874, a second priest was sent to Molokai, the Dutch Picpus Father, André Burgerman. He was originally meant to help and support Damien, but quickly became the source of major conflicts and disagreement. Because Father Burgerman had studied medicine for a couple of years, he demanded the responsibility for the leper house. It became a fierce battle, costing both priests enormous amounts of energy. Several accusations were made, one of them that Damien was having relationships with women. When Damien started to arouse royal interest, this encouraged the ambitious and jealous Burgerman to cause even more commotion. Meanwhile, Damien built several churches and tried to buy medication for the patients with the funds he received. The Health Council allowed him to return to Honolulu for a short period. Those were moments that Damien used to go on retreat and to refine his spiritual life.

At the beginning of 1876, a leprosy specialist, Dr. Woods, came to visit the island. He wanted to determine whether there was a connection between leprosy and syphilis. Some people claimed that leprosy only infected syphilitics. It was in that period that Father Damien noticed that he himself had the first symptoms of leprosy. When Dr. Woods started praising Father Damien after his departure, this was not appreciated by the congregation. They thought that Damien was getting too much attention.

What is certain is that he continued to worry about finding medication to cure leprosy. He bought Chinese medication with which he experimented. In order to measure their effect, he divided the test group into two subgroups, one received the medication, and another received a substitute. Thus, unknowingly, he developed the idea of placebos.

In August 1880, Father André Burgerman left again. For Damien this meant a return to peace and quietness, but once again he had to solve problems all by himself.

The year 1881 was marked by the ordination of a new Bishop. Köckeman became the successor of Maigret, and in that same year he would visit Damien. Damien received a medal from the King.

Another dramatic incident was when a ship dumped a group of lepers in sea during violent autumn storm. Several people got killed, and Damien fiercely protested against this barbarous deed.

He continued to ask the assistance of Sisters to nurse the lepers. A first step was the arrival of American Sisters of the Order of Saint-Francis, who came to help in the leper house in Honolulu. In the meantime, a fellow priest had arrived, a certain Albert Montiton. This French father had a terrible skin disease, and an impossible character; Once again this caused enormous problems for Damien.

In November 1883, the first Sisters arrived in Honolulu. However, on Molokai still no Sisters were available, and doctors avoided the island. In March 1884, Damien was officially examined and diagnosed with leprosy. A humiliating examination it became, because people were still convinced that leprosy was a consequence of an infection with syphilis. One visitor, Charles Stoddard, wrote a first book about Damien. It became a best-seller and was translated in many languages

In 1886, Damien was officially acknowledged to be a leper, and therefore segregated by his superiors, meaning that he was no longer allowed to leave the island. He would return to Honolulu one more time, where he was treated by the Sisters. It was for him the opportunity to plea with the Sisters to go to Molokai. Meanwhile, plans were being made to erect a hospital on Molokai. In 1888 his wish became true when in October the first Sisters arrived. Once again, there were allegations that the funds that Damien had raised were being used in a wrong way. These allegations were more crosses for him to bear, adding to them the illness that grew worse every day. In 1889, his condition got worse and he died on 15 April. He was laid out in his Saint-Philomena Church and buried in its shadows. In 1936, his mortal remains were brought back to Louvain. In 1977 the Pope, Paul VI, declared him venerable. Beatification followed in 1995 and canonisation in 2009.

### **Father Damien's unique pastoral approach.**

Father Damien was already famous in his own lifetime. He did not want to, but with the publication of his letter and other writings by his brother Pamphile, his dedication to the lepers on Molokai became known. His first and greatest worry was to improve the fate of these people, and to free them of their stigma. By becoming a leper, himself he physically learnt what it meant not to be welcome anymore among your confreres.

Damien was a Brabant cart horse. He was hardworking man, who was very outspoken. On the list of saints and blessed people he is certainly one of the most violent-tempered. His tough character caused him trouble more than once, but he nevertheless went his own way with it. His beatitude is not so much the result of the brave nature of his charity efforts, but all the more of the quickness and the humility with which he recognised his own limitations and used them as stepping stones to start all over again. He always insisted on the importance of regularly examining one's conscience, and he considered the sacrament of confession as sacred.

On the basis of the order of the day that he used to write down during his retreats, we know that he was very keen about praying. In the end it became the only thing he could fall back on. Prayer had to help him resist the temptations, and had to give him the strength to continue to love his fellow man. His childhood ideal was never to speak badly of someone, the reality of a tough life showed him that it was not always that easy, but it also allowed him to refine that ideal. Although he was very much concerned about converting as many people as possible in the beginning of his career as missionary, he became more ecumenical toward the end, living peacefully and constructively together with the Protestants. Against the Bishop's will, he used to call the local vicar his brother in Christ.

Damien often had problems with the rather strict and rigid way in which the Church and worldly authorities took their decisions. His pastoral sensitivity often caused him to break a law, but his conscience justified those offences,

because he committed them because he always radically opted for the wellbeing of his fellow man.

Upon his arrival on Molokai, he was facing an impossible task. How could he stop these people, living in this place stripped of all possible hope, from giving in? He did not develop an intricate strategy, but did things step by step. After having constructed a number of houses, he suggested other projects that had to improve the life situation of the patients.

His most profound experience was the constant confrontation with death. In the 17 years that he spent on Molokai, no less than 3000 people died. His presbytery stood next to the graveyard, and he made a habit of praying the rosary amidst the graves every day. Death became ever present in his life, and faithfully he learned to deal with the deceased across the border between life and death. He had nursed, and assisted many of these people during their final moments. We can safely state that Father Damien was a specialist in palliative care.

Above all, Damien was a man who had well understood the words from the Gospel: "Anyone who finds his life will lose it; anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 10: 39). Unconsciously, we are impressed, comparing Damien's and Pamphile's letters. Both had started with the same kind of idealism. Pamphile had to resign himself to a more secure and comfortable life due to the circumstances, and could therefore concentrate on details, and become annoyed owing to minor inconveniences. To Damien, the other – in the concrete, his suffering fellow man – was the dominant reality. All of his own worries and concerns disappeared to be confirmed by his fellow man. He turned out a true apostle of charity.

## Les Défis Missionnaires Dans Le Moments De Captivité

Haïti, le 02 mai 2023. J'ai commencé mon voyage en partant de la communauté de Carrefourjoute, au sud, pour me rendre à Port-au-Prince, la capitale. Comme il était encore tôt, 5h30 du matin, j'ai pris la moto pour aller à la ville d'Au Cays, à la station de bus pour Port-au-Prince. Nous nous sommes arrangées entre nous que je devais venir à Port-au-Prince une fois par mois pendant quelques jours pour être avec une sœur qui est seule dans la communauté de Babiole en ville, en l'absence de l'économe de la mission qui était en congé dans son pays d'origine. En même temps, je faisais de la comptabilité.

Ce matin-là, j'ai ressenti une lourdeur inhabituelle, que je n'arrivais pas à comprendre. Avec le recul, je me suis dit qu'il s'agissait peut-être d'une prémonition de quelque chose qui allait m'arriver. Il y avait moins de passagers dans le bus, ce qui n'était pas normal. J'ai commencé à prier pour que Dieu me protège et que je voyage en toute sécurité. Il nous a fallu 3 à 4 heures pour atteindre Port-au-Prince. Ensuite, nous avons atteint les routes de 'Kafou' où les routes étaient mauvaises, boueuses et inondées.

Et les chauffeurs ont remis de l'argent aux bandits. C'est le moment le plus critique du voyage, où l'on ne sait pas ce qui peut arriver.

Soudain, l'un des bandits armés d'un fusil est entré dans le bus et a d'abord attrapé l'homme assis à côté de moi. Ensuite, le même bandit m'a attrapé et m'a traîné rapidement dans le bus. J'ai commencé à paniquer et j'ai crié fort, « Le précieux sang de Jésus-Christ sauve-moi ! » J'ai répété plusieurs fois cette prière d'invocation demandant à Dieu de m'aider. Malgré la peur qui régnait à ce moment précis, Dieu m'a donné la présence d'esprit de prendre mon petit sac où je gardais mon téléphone portable pour faciliter la communication plus tard.

Ils m'ont poussé dans une petite voiture et m'ont recouvert le visage d'un tissu. Alors que la petite voiture démarrait, j'ai expliqué aux bandits que je suis une pauvre missionnaire religieuse travaillant à l'intérieur d'Haïti. Nous n'avons pas de salaire. Contrairement à d'autres congrégations, la nôtre n'a pas de grandes institutions comme des écoles ou des hôpitaux qui rapportent de l'argent. Cependant, je ne sais pas s'ils ont été convaincus. Ils croient toujours que les étrangers sont venus en Haïti pour gagner de l'argent. J'ai ensuite essayé de les convaincre que Jésus les aime... Nous sommes frères et sœurs, enfants d'un seul Dieu, le Père. J'ai répété, « *Jésus vous aime.* » Ils ne voulaient pas entendre Jésus... Ils m'ont crié de me taire mais j'ai continué à dire, « *Jésus vous aime.* » Quand nous sommes arrivés au bout de la route, j'ai vu que l'homme qui était enlevé avant moi était déjà là. Les bandits sont sortis de la voiture, ont commencé à inspecter le contenu de nos sacs et ont pris tout ce qu'ils pouvaient trouver. Insatisfaits de ce qu'ils ont obtenu, ils ont demandé ma croix et ma bague, que j'ai données. L'un d'eux m'a ensuite demandé si j'avais de l'argent dans mes poches, ce à quoi j'ai répondu que je n'en avais pas, à l'exception de mon chapelet. Il a pris aussi mon chapelet.

Nous avons commencé à monter et sommes passés devant de petites maisons cimentées jusqu'à ce que nous atteignions la « cellule de prison » au sommet où ils mettent ceux qu'ils ont kidnappés. Trois jeunes bandits armés étaient postés près de la porte en tant que gardes. Lorsque nous sommes entrés tous les deux, il y a eu un silence de bienvenue. Les bandits nous ont entassés dans une petite pièce fermée et délabrée, sans fenêtre et avec une seule porte. C'est vraiment comme une cellule de prison : pas d'aération, pas de lumière, pas de montre pour chronométrer le temps et pas de téléphone portable. Il y avait six personnes dans la pièce lorsque nous sommes arrivés : trois hommes et trois femmes, plus deux d'entre

nous, les nouveaux arrivants. Le fait de ne pas être seul était ma seule consolation à ce moment-là. J'ai commencé à parler à chacun, à leur demander leur nom, comment ils avaient été kidnappés, etc... Mais les conversations étaient toujours prudentes, car il y avait une caméra dans cette petite pièce.

Chaque jour, une ou deux victimes s'ajoutaient à notre groupe, ce qui signifiait que l'espace que nous partagions devenait plus petit jusqu'à ce que nous atteignions finalement onze personnes. Nous étions serrés comme des sardines. Nous devions nous partager le peu d'espace disponible. Nous ne pouvions nous asseoir et nous coucher que sur le même espace chaque jour, avec un vieux tapis qu'ils appelaient moquette. Il était très difficile d'étirer notre corps pour dormir, car il aurait traversé l'espace de quelqu'un d'autre et l'aurait heurté. Nos mouvements étaient donc très limités. Nous avons dormi sans couverture (il m'est venu à l'esprit qu'une famille pauvre se trouve dans la même situation, avec une maison trop petite qui ne leur permet pas de se reposer correctement). Nous avons appris à ne pas nous plaindre.

La pièce était très chaude. Lorsqu'il pleuvait, cela aurait été une bénédiction pour rafraîchir la pièce, mais lorsque les fortes pluies arrivaient la nuit, le toit fuyait. Tout le monde devait se lever, enlever le tapis, mettre des bassines, des seaux, des casseroles, etc. pour recueillir l'eau de pluie et la jeter à l'extérieur. Nous restions tous debout, sans dormir, jusqu'à ce que les pluies cessent. Nous avons formé une petite communauté de collaboration pour survivre dans ces circonstances.

La nourriture et l'eau n'étaient données qu'une fois par jour. En général, la nourriture se composait de riz et de haricots, et parfois de spaghettis. Même si elle était petite, la nourriture était bien répartie, en tenant compte des besoins de chacun. Il n'y avait pas assez d'assiettes ni de cuillères, il fallait donc attendre. J'ai eu le privilège de recevoir la nourriture en premier avec la cuillère en plastique. Je dis toujours, « *Merci, Madame Camille Suze* » Madame Suze à cette époque était en captivité depuis 52 jours. Elle était comme une mère qui aimait s'occuper de nous tous. Nous faisions aussi la vaisselle à tour de rôle.

L'eau était le problème le plus difficile. Nous avions souvent soif parce qu'il faisait très chaud dans la pièce. L'eau était limitée et rationnée. Nous avions une petite bouteille dans laquelle nous buvions le peu d'eau que nous avions économisé. Si nous ne pouvions pas boire à petites gorgées, nous nous mouillions la bouche pour survivre à la chaleur et à la soif. La chaleur et la soif étaient presque insupportables ; cela me rappelait Jésus lors de sa crucifixion.

Cette expérience m'a fait comprendre qu'il fallait vivre simplement, en se contentant de l'essentiel. La vie, telle qu'elle était, est apparue comme la plus précieuse, car nous ne nous plaignions plus de ne pas pouvoir changer de vêtements. Je n'ai jamais eu l'occasion de changer de vêtements pendant 16 jours. La survie était la seule chose qui comptait à ce moment-là. Et une autre prise de conscience : Je peux tout perdre, mais ce qui compte dans ma vie, c'est Dieu.

Jour après jour, j'ai commencé à vivre en communauté avec eux. Je suis la seule étrangère et ils m'appelaient « *Chinwa* », c'est-à-dire chinoise. Je leur ai expliqué que j'étais philippine, pas chinoise, et à partir de ce moment-là, ils m'ont appelée « *Philippine* ». Ils ont raconté comment ils avaient été kidnappés. La plupart d'entre eux ont été enlevés dans des transports publics ou des voitures privées. Chacune est arrivée à un moment différent. C'est Mme Camille Suze qui a passé le plus grand nombre de jours en captivité, soit 52 jours. Personne ne laidait à trouver de l'argent pour la rançon et sa mère était malade, de sorte qu'elle ne pouvait rien dire à sa mère, sous peine de la voir quitter ce monde. Chacun devait attendre sa rançon pour être libéré et l'angoisse et la douleur de l'attente étaient comme une torture. Ils étaient tous gentils avec moi. Je me suis sentie respectée et je me suis sentie à l'aise avec eux car nous partagions les mêmes sentiments, le même stress et la même peur, à savoir si nous pouvions en sortir morts ou vivants.

Au début de mon expérience de captivité de 16 jours, j'ai lutté avec Dieu et je l'ai bombardé de nombreuses questions : pourquoi les forces du mal semblent-elles puissantes, pourquoi les bandits qui kidnappent les gens deviennent-ils plus forts, pourquoi le monde est-il infesté de



maux comme le virus. En voyant les profondes souffrances de mes compagnons de captivité, qui étaient humiliés en tant que personnes et faisaient l'expérience de conditions mauvaises et inhumaines, j'ai demandé à Dieu : « Le peuple haïtien a déjà beaucoup souffert, pourquoi doit-il encore souffrir davantage ? » J'ai été confronté à ma propre petite souffrance comparée à la leur. J'ai offert ma souffrance à Jésus sur la croix. Les Haïtiens sont des personnes résilientes et très courageuses. Malgré leur situation déplorable et incertaine, ils espèrent en Dieu qu'un jour ils seront sauvés et libérés.

Chaque jour et chaque nuit ont été des moments de prière où nous avons imploré l'intervention de Dieu. En priant la Divine Miséricorde, nous avons imploré Jésus d'avoir pitié et compassion de nous tous et de nous sauver. En priant le Précieux Sang de Jésus, nous l'avons supplié de convertir les bandits et d'adoucir leurs cœurs. Nous nous sommes tournés vers notre Mère Marie pour qu'elle intervienne maternellement. Pour moi, c'était une bataille spirituelle entre le bien et le mal. Finalement, Dieu le Père a fait son intervention divine. Je l'ai entendu dire : *« Ne crains pas, je suis avec toi. Que ton cœur ne se trouble pas. Je suis ton Dieu, je te donnerai de la force, je t'aiderai. Je te soutiendrai par ma main puissante qui ne perdra jamais le combat. »* Is. 41 :10

En effet, les bandits commençaient à adoucir leurs cœurs. Nous n'avons pas été torturés, ni battus, ni violés comme les autres bandits l'ont fait pour d'autres victimes. Nous avons reçu de légères tapes sur la tête et les jambes à deux reprises lorsque nous ne pouvions pas accélérer les négociations par téléphone. Je n'ai pas été traumatisé par la façon dont ils nous ont traités, contrairement à ce que j'ai entendu de la part d'autres personnes après leur libération. La puissance du combat spirituel était si évidente et si forte. En vérité, avec la prière, rien n'est impossible à Dieu. Dieu s'est beaucoup battu pour nous. Les prières et les invocations de nos sœurs ICM et de toutes les personnes du monde entier ont atteint les oreilles et le cœur de Dieu. A toutes les sœurs des différents districts/missions : *« Vous avez participé à ce combat spirituel ; vos prières ont vaincu le mal et le bien en est sorti victorieux. A vous, nos*

*amis et collaborateurs en Haïti, et aux prêtres et religieux, en particulier le Père Adrian Louie Atonducan, CICM et la communauté philippine en Haïti, le Père Jack des Bénédictins en Haïti, et surtout, le Père Rick Leo Frechette, un prêtre passioniste et son coéquipier Rafael, qui ont joué un rôle déterminant dans ma libération, MERCI BEAUCOUP ! MERCI À DIEU d'avoir fait de vous tous ses instruments. »*

Je ne remercierai jamais assez Sœur Stella Xalxo, ICM, qui a dû supporter l'agonie de négociations stressantes et de paroles menaçantes de la part des bandits. Son courage, sa patience et sa persévérance m'ont ramenée à la maison.

Je prie pour la conversion de tous les bandits et pour la libération de toutes les autres victimes d'enlèvement. Elles ont souffert d'une souffrance incroyable ne sachant pas où trouver l'argent de la rançon ou toute autre aide qui leur assurerait leur libération.

Mes profonds remerciements vont également à vous, Sœurs Sandra et Esther, aux Sœurs Lieve, Rachel, Adrienne et Cora pour votre soutien affectueux et votre profonde préoccupation tout au long des jours de ma captivité. Je vous suis reconnaissante pour votre amour. Puissiez-vous continuer à être des phares d'espoir et de libération dans ce monde brisé.

Je crois fermement que, d'après ce qui s'est passé dans notre vie, que ce soit en bien ou en mal, Dieu a un message pour les missionnaires. Mon expérience de la captivité m'a fait découvrir et réaliser que ma foi est si faible. Je manque encore de confiance en Dieu. Cela a été un moment de purification pour moi en tant que missionnaire, afin que je puisse apprécier ce qui est essentiel dans la vie - une foi solide en Dieu et un témoignage de l'amour, de la joie et de la paix de Dieu dans ce monde brisé.

Vivre notre vie en tant que missionnaire religieuse comporte toujours un risque - un défi, où que nous soyons. Nous sommes vulnérables à de mauvaises situations, comme les enlèvements. Cela fait partie de notre marche à la suite de Jésus... sur le chemin de la croix. Malgré ces défis et ces risques, nous, les sœurs d'Haïti, avons choisi de rester pour être solidaires de ce peuple pauvre et souffrant. Dans

les bons comme dans les mauvais moments, les sœurs restent. C'est notre appel en tant que missionnaires à poursuivre la mission de Dieu avec les personnes qui luttent pour la justice et la libération.

*« Que son très saint, très sacré, très adorable et très incompréhensible nom de Dieu soit toujours loué, béni, aimé, adoré et glorifié au ciel, sur la terre et sous la terre par toutes les créatures de Dieu, et par le Sacré-Cœur de notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ dans le très Saint Sacrement de l'autel. Que l'Esprit de Dieu guérisse les blessés et les brisés et fasse toutes choses nouvelles ».*



Photos from SEDOS Christmas Party



# SEDOS SPRING SEMINAR ON THURSDAY, 21 MARCH 2024

At the UISG, Piazza di Ponte Sant'Angelo, 28, 00186, Rome

## PROVISIONAL PROGRAM

### Mission of Hope: Mission Gifts from Each Continent Today

9.30	Registration
10:00	Prayer and Welcome
10:15	Introductory talk
10:30	Talk by Msgr. Graham BELL, Undersecretary of the Dicastery for Evangelisation, Section for Fundamental Questions of Evangelisation in the World. <b>“Pilgrims of Hope: Jubilee 2025”</b>
11:15	Tea/Coffee break
11:30	Talk by Fr. Stan Lubungo, M.Afr. Superior General (Africa) <b>“Mission of Hope: Mission Gifts from Each Continent Today.”</b>
12:15	LUNCH BREAK
14:30	Panel Discussion Fr. Márcio Flávio Martins, CICM, General Councillor (Latin America) Sr. Virginie Habib, Secretary General, Rosary Sisters (Middle East) Sr. Giuliana Bolzan, OLA (Europe) Sr. Mikaelin Bupu, SSpS, Vice Superior General (Asia)
16:30	Vote of thanks
17:00	Tea/coffee and departure



**MISSION OF HOPE:**  
**Mission Gifts from**  
**Each Continent Today!**

## **SEDOS SPRING SEMINAR**

**Thursday, 21 MARCH 2024**

*At the UISG, Piazza di Ponte Sant'Angelo, 28, 00186 Rome*

### **Next Event**

**SEDOS Residential Seminar 2024**  
**At Ariccia (6 – 10 May, 2024)**

***Theme: Prophetic Witness for Universal Communion***  
***Mission in Conflict zones and Healing***

Casa Divin Maestro,  
Strada Regionale, 218, Km 11,  
00072 Ariccia, RM