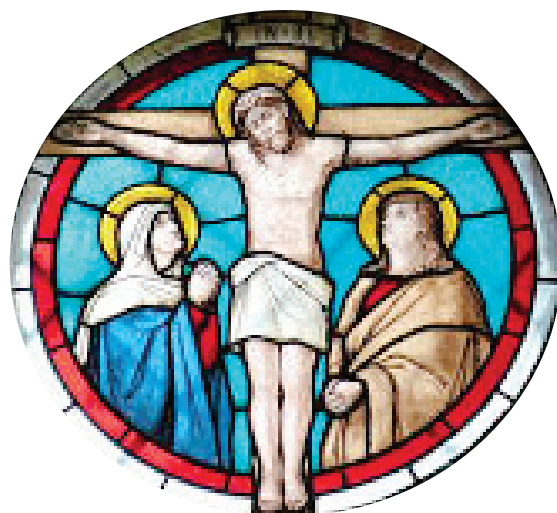


# Bulletin 2020

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## ***SEDOS***

*(Service of Documentation and Study on Global Mission)  
is a forum open to Institutes of Consecrated Life,  
which commit themselves to deepening their understanding of Global Mission.  
It encourages research and disseminates information  
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## EDITORIAL



**Dear Readers,**

We had planned to publish some articles on *Mission in China Today* based on the

conference we had planned for SEDOS in Rome. But like so many other events we have had to postpone it and so we are saving the articles for a later date when the event will have taken place. Instead, we have selected some articles in different languages that concern mission today in general.

The first article is by Pierre Diarra who was asked to comment on the different contributions for the Dossier, “*What did I learn from the mission*”, in the French review SPIRITUS of September 2016. In short, he states that: “From the previous testimonies that make up this Dossier, it is possible to indicate avenues for theological reflection. Witnesses emphasize their relationship with Christ and those that they must build up with those to whom they are sent, revealing how Christ is the foundation of mission and why mission is above all a service. For the missionary, this first supposes a special bond with Christ, a vocation, with a desire felt personally and confirmed by an official call to the Church. This then implies, for the person sent, work on oneself and adequate training to render better service.”

The next article by Jakob Kavunkal, SVD, shows how Genesis Chapter Three, in contrast to the traditional interpretation, i.e. the description of the human fall and the origin of sin, allows for an alternate reading. Furthermore, it points out the implications of this new understanding for the theology of mission today.

The third article by James Kroeger, MM, looks at the last two International Eucharistic Congresses (IEC) that were held in the Philippines. Many parallels between these two congresses can be drawn; however, according to the author, in the basic vision and orientation of both events, one pivotal theme recurs constantly: Eucharist and Mission.

The fourth article from the hand of Sr. Maria De Giorgi is about the visit of Pope Francis to Japan, a travel he wanted to make as young missionary, he shared in Tokyo on the evening of November 23: “*I don't know if you know it, but since I was young I felt sympathy and affection for this land. Many years have passed since that missionary impulse, the realization of which was long overdue. Today the Lord offers me the opportunity to be among you as a missionary pilgrim in the footsteps of great witnesses of the faith*”.

We close this issue of the Bulletin with a text for contemplation during this Lenten Season, written by Nicholas Austin, SJ: *The Virtue of Asceticism*.

We add to all this an overview of the lectures that will be given at our next Residential Seminar on the topic of “*Living Green Mission*”.

You will find on the back cover of this edition a prayer for those who are suffering from and/or are afraid of the corona virus, and for those who feel it is their mission to help those afflicted by it.

Fr. Peter Baekelmans, CICM  
Director of SEDOS

## Configuration actuelle de la mission

*Responsable, pour la France, de l'Union pontificale missionnaire, œuvre chargée de la formation au sein des OPM, Pierre Diarra enseigne à l'ISTR de l'Institut catholique de Paris. Il est membre du Conseil épiscopal pour le dialogue interreligieux et les nouveaux courants religieux.*

À partir des témoignages précédents qui constituent ce dossier, il est possible d'indiquer des pistes de réflexions théologiques. Les témoins insistent sur leurs relations avec le Christ et sur celles qu'ils doivent tisser avec les personnes vers qui ils sont envoyés, en dévoilant comment le Christ est au fondement de la mission et pourquoi celle-ci est avant tout un service. Pour le missionnaire, cela suppose d'abord un lien spécial avec le Christ, une vocation, avec un désir ressenti personnellement et confirmé par un appel officiel en Eglise. Cela implique ensuite, pour la personne envoyée, un travail sur soi et une formation adéquate pour mieux rendre service.

### **La mission: sortir de sa coquille**

Pour Bertrand Evelin, missionnaire Oblat de Marie Immaculée (OMI), la mission exige que l'on sorte de sa coquille, de soi-même. L'expérience d'un séjour à l'étranger permet de relativiser diverses choses : « il existe donc sur la planète d'autres nombrils, par lesquels passent d'autres axes du monde, d'autres mises en cohérence du réel. » Les Bwa du Mali disent : « Tant que le crapaud n'est pas tombé dans l'eau chaude, il ignore qu'il existe autre chose (que l'eau froide)<sup>1</sup>. » Le contexte du proverbe et le symbolisme des Bwa permettent de préciser que l'eau

froide renvoie à une certaine paix, tandis que l'eau chaude indique l'empressement, l'agitation, voire le conflit et la violence. Changer de cadre de vie comporte toujours une certaine violence et, pour être bien comprise, la nouvelle situation doit être mise en rapport avec l'ancienne. De même, l'eau froide doit faire penser à l'eau chaude tout comme la tranquillité doit suggérer l'agitation ou l'inquiétude.

Sortir de chez soi pour aller chez les autres est une expérience qui permet de découvrir comment les autres vivent, différemment, et aussi de percevoir avec un nouveau regard comment on vit soi-même. Chercher à comprendre le sens des différences c'est écouter ce qu'en disent les personnes chez qui on les trouve. Que dit-on, par exemple, de la manière d'accueillir l'étranger, des règles concernant les bonnes manières, le « bien parler »? Comment communique-t-on selon « les bonnes coutumes » locales?

Bertrand Evelin se préoccupe de l'histoire de la Bretagne au moment où il va s'en éloigner, comme s'il était nécessaire de retrouver ses racines pour mieux s'ouvrir à l'altérité. Pour sortir de sa coquille, faut-il s'assurer qu'on pourra s'y référer? Si les autres peuvent expliquer une cohérence qui gagne à être connue, il faut que le missionnaire puisse expliquer à son tour qui il est et la cohérence des personnes avec qui il vivait avant d'être envoyé. La relativité culturelle ainsi dévoilée grâce à la présence du missionnaire, témoin d'une autre culture, favorise une ouverture aux cultures qui portent le message biblique depuis de nombreux siècles.

Pour aller vers les autres, le missionnaire doit vaincre sa timidité et inventer des « stratégies » pour communiquer. Il s'agit, selon Bertrand Evelin, « d'une mise à nu : le passage, déroutant mais nécessaire, du prosélytisme conquérant à la quête d'une

<sup>1</sup> Pierre DIARRA, Proverbe et philosophie. Essai sur la pensée des Bwa du Mali, Paris, Karthala, 2002, p. 94.

vérité toujours à venir ». Qu'un Français se rende en Afrique, au Canada ou ailleurs, le problème reste très concret : « comment entrer en contact avec les autres? » Comment s'adresser à l'autre de façon naturelle ? Pour Bertrand Evelin, « il n'y a pas de mission sans décentrement ; osons le mot : sans mise à mort ! » Se décentrer pour connaître les autres avant de leur proposer la Bonne Nouvelle de Jésus-Christ ; d'où la nécessité, pour le missionnaire, de parler la langue des autres.

### **La mission: parler la langue des autres**

Le missionnaire propose l'Evangile tel qu'il a été inculture dans son peuple. Quel que soit le peuple, s'il accueille un missionnaire, il entre dans un processus d'accueil du Christ ressuscité. Certains résistent, d'autres l'accueillent et se convertissent. Le missionnaire prend conscience que le Christ le conduit vers une nouvelle manière de



<https://www.diocesemontreal.org/en/news/news/world-mission-sunday-2014>

vivre la foi chrétienne, en donnant, dans un contexte nouveau, une place prépondérante à la langue locale pour préciser la théologie, l'ecclésiologie et la soteriologie chrétiennes. Tout étranger est invité à apprendre la langue des personnes qui l'accueillent. Pour le missionnaire, une note supplémentaire doit être précisée. En effet, il s'agit aussi de comprendre les conceptions philosophiques et religieuses des personnes à qui le missionnaire est envoyé. Il faut que le missionnaire soit, à la suite de saint Paul, juif avec les Juifs et grec avec les Grecs. Quels que soient le missionnaire et son profil imaginé — on se forge toujours sa « petite

idée » sur « le missionnaire » — on se rend vite compte que chaque missionnaire est différent et qu'il faut l'accueillir tel qu'il est, en toute confiance, en vue d'une commune compréhension de l'inculturation. Selon Jean-Paul II, « le processus d'insertion de l'Eglise dans les cultures des peuples demande beaucoup de temps : il ne s'agit pas d'une simple adaptation extérieure, car l'inculturation "signifie une intime transformation des authentiques valeurs culturelles par leur intégration dans le christianisme, et l'enracinement du christianisme dans les diverses cultures humaines". C'est donc un processus profond et global qui engage le message chrétien de même que la réflexion et la pratique de l'Eglise » (*Redemptoris missio* n°52).

Ce processus d'inculturation ou d'interculturalité<sup>2</sup> permet aux chrétiens vivant de plusieurs cultures de tenir compte des exigences de l'interculturalité, si chère à Michael Amaladoss et aux théologiens asiatiques. Il faut entrer dans une logique d'échanges entre Eglises et cultures diverses, sans peur de désamorcer bien des conflits théologiques. En incarnant l'Evangile dans les cultures du monde, l'Eglise tente en même temps d'introduire tous les peuples, avec leurs particularités, dans la grande communauté des chrétiens, l'Eglise universelle.

### **La joie de l'Évangile comme un parfum**

Il est important pour le missionnaire de savoir qu'il va pouvoir partager ses convictions avec diverses personnes. Les valeurs universelles telles que l'accueil, le partage ou la simplicité de vie des

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<sup>2</sup> Ce terme permet de signifier que l'Évangile arrive rarement dans une seule culture, mais dans des contextes où les hommes et les femmes vivent de plusieurs éléments de diverses cultures, d'où l'articulation entre inculturation et mission intergentes ; voir Pierre Diarra, « De l'inculturation à l'intergentes. Un chemin d'un vivre-ensemble », dans Paulin Poucota, Gaston Ogui et Pierre Diarra (eds.), *Les défis du vivre-ensemble au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Contributions à l'occasion des 15 ans de l'Université catholique d'Afrique de l'Ouest*, Paris, Karthala, 2016, p. 167-178.

populations, peuvent amener le missionnaire, tel M<sup>gr</sup> Gnonhossou, évêque béninois, à découvrir que « la mission ne consiste pas en premier lieu à enseigner la foi à l'autre mais à faire avec l'autre le chemin de sa rencontre de bonheur, de sa découverte de la présence de Dieu ». Le missionnaire découvre souvent un peuple qui inspire respect par l'attachement à sa culture, l'attention aux femmes, aux personnes âgées et aux enfants. « Ce que, par respect et amour, nous donnons aux autres nous revient sous une autre forme ». Maria Lee présente la joie de se donner, de proposer et de recevoir l'Evangile comme un parfum : « le meilleur chemin d'évangélisation c'est d'être soi-même évangélisé. Ce n'est pas de faire des tas de choses extraordinaires. C'est plutôt de témoigner de la beauté, de la joie de l'Evangile à l'image d'un parfum, en contemplant sans cesse celui qui nous aime, nous transfigure, nous fortifie et nous envoie à la rencontre des frères et des sœurs pour nous donner au service de la venue du Royaume de Dieu. »

Comme l'explique Bertrand Evelin, il faut savoir « vider les poches » devant Dieu : « En dialogue avec d'autres, nous y avons joué les notes de la foi et de la charité, rendu compte de l'espérance qui est en nous, été témoins des joies et des espoirs, des tristesses et des angoisses des hommes et des femmes de ce temps. Désormais, les poches pleines, il nous revenait de déposer cette vie du monde au pied de Celui à qui elle revient. » À chaque peuple l'Eglise transmet ses valeurs, en assumant ce qu'il y a de bon dans chaque culture et en la renouvelant de l'intérieur, comme la déclaration conciliaire *Nostra aetate* l'a bien signifié : L'Eglise « exhorte donc ses fils pour que, avec prudence et charité, par le dialogue et par la collaboration avec ceux qui suivent d'autres religions, et tout en témoignant de la foi et de la vie chrétiennes, ils reconnaissent, préservent et fassent progresser les valeurs spirituelles, morales et socioculturelles qui se trouvent en eux » (n° 2). Par l'inculturation et l'interculturalité, l'Eglise et tout missionnaire entrent dans un processus qui,

loin d'être un chemin d'aliénation, ouvre une voie de libération et de développement intégral grâce à l'Evangile : « c'est à la liberté que vous avez été appelés » dit saint Paul aux Galates (5,13).

Dans un monde marqué par la pluralité et la relativité, le risque est grand de privilégier ce qui semble sûr, dogmatique, en cédant à des crispations. Annoncer un Dieu qui libère, c'est inviter au dialogue et à la construction commune d'un monde où il fait bon vivre. Les personnes plus ou moins intégristes imaginent souvent des vérités sûres, sans nuances, laissant peu de place à celui qui ne partage pas les mêmes convictions. Elles croient qu'il est inutile de dialoguer si l'interlocuteur n'est pas disposé à changer de religion ; de même elles refusent l'œcuménisme. Il est urgent de privilégier l'amour, l'ouverture de chemins de dialogue et les engagements communs pour faire advenir un règne de justice et de paix.

### **La mission: entrer en relation, écouter**

Plus qu'un « faire », explique Annonciata Mapendo Masirika, la mission engage d'abord dans des relations interpersonnelles. « Dans le dialogue avec mes sœurs en communauté, j'ai pris conscience que la première chose à faire c'était d'entrer en relation avec [cette femme étrangère] à travers des visites régulières. [...]



<https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2015/02/04/catholics-fear-attacks-india/nun-greets-refugee-at-camp-in-india/>

Marginalisée par son entourage, elle s'était repliée sur elle-même et était devenue agressive. » Accepter de ne pas « donner tout de suite ce que l'on a » peut permettre de tisser de bonnes relations et de mieux

percevoir l'ampleur des problèmes. On comprend pourquoi, [à propos d'un service d'aide à domicile auprès de personnes âgées], la provinciale des Franciscaines missionnaires de Marie a dit à Maria Lee : « Ce n'est pas une tâche très facile et c'est fatigant. Mais si tu veux le faire, c'est un travail magnifique, comme franciscaine, pour contacter des personnes isolées. »

Quand « l'immense majorité de la population nigérienne est de religion musulmane, le reste se répartissant entre les diverses confessions chrétiennes et la religion traditionnelle africaine », il est important de ne pas avoir pour seule conception de la mission une proposition de l'Évangile en vue d'amener les populations à se convertir et à adhérer au christianisme. Le missionnaire risque de se décourager assez vite. Le père Léo Laurence a quitté son emploi, sa famille, son pays et a accepté de se former, durant onze ans avec les Missionnaires d'Afrique, pour se retrouver dans la paroisse de Zinder, au Niger, à s'occuper de quelque quatre cents chrétiens dont la plupart sont des « expatriés venus du Bénin, du Togo, du Ghana, du Nigeria, du Burkina Faso et de la Côte d'Ivoire ». Il propose un Évangile pour la paix et la joie, en dialoguant avec les musulmans, parfois en leur faisant des promesses. Après avoir appris que les

matériaux [qu'on voulait lui acheter] serviraient à la construction du mur d'enceinte de l'église, le commerçant Issoufou dit : « Selon ma religion, si je vous vends [ces matériaux], j'irai en enfer. » Le missionnaire lui dit : « si jamais vous êtes envoyé en enfer parce que vous m'avez vendu, à moi un chrétien, des marchandises, alors je prendrai votre place pour aller en enfer. » À cette promesse, Issoufou a accepté de prendre l'argent et de vendre les marchandises.

La mission peut consister en une présence : « essayer d'être là, avec eux, sachant très bien que le dialogue n'est parfois qu'un monologue ». Le père Léo comprend que son apostolat de « présence » précède celui du « faire ». Dans un contexte de violence, témoigner de sa vie de foi, de l'Évangile de Jésus-Christ, renvoie réellement au martyre des chrétiens. Ces derniers sont invités à faire preuve de patience et de persévérance dans le dialogue islamo-chrétien pour goûter l'amour et la bonté de Dieu. La construction de la paix est à ce prix.

### **Contempler et faire un travail sur soi-même**

Le baptisé, invité fortement depuis le concile Vatican II à vivre pleinement la mission, ne peut pas faire l'économie de la contemplation. Il est, à la suite du Christ, un trait d'union entre ses frères et sœurs au sein d'une Église désormais perçue comme sacrement du salut, signe qui réalise ce qu'il signifie. Avec toute l'Église, il est invité à

scruter les signes des temps en articulant activités missionnaires et contemplation.

Bertrand Evelin attire l'attention sur le passage de l'évangile de Luc où Jésus envoie les soixante-douze disciples (Lc 10, 1 *sqq*), notamment sur leur retour de mission : « A leur retour, les disciples ne racontent

pas ce qu'ils ont fait mais ce qu'ils ont vu : "Seigneur, même les démons nous étaient soumis en ton nom". Ils se définissent comme contemplatifs, scrutateurs des signes des temps. » Il s'agit d'un regard postpascal, à l'affût des signes discrets du Ressuscité au cœur du monde. C'est là que le missionnaire est invité à se former à la liberté et à la dignité, à vivre de façon nouvelle, en comptant sur le Seigneur et en faisant confiance aux personnes vers qui il est envoyé. Selon Maria Lee, une telle confiance



Christian Service Cliparts

est l'« unique bagage pour partir vers le pays » où elle est envoyée. C'est cette confiance qui permet aux « missionnés » d'accueillir facilement le missionnaire et, au-delà, l'Évangile du salut.



<https://centralumchurch.wordpress.com/2014/03/31/whats-a-united-methodist/umc-open-hearts-open-minds-open-doors/>

### **La mission est avant tout l'œuvre de Dieu**

Étant avant tout l'œuvre de la Trinité, la mission s'enracine dans la foi, dans la confiance en un Dieu qui est lui-même missionnaire, comme le précise Raymond Rossignol. Dans son immense bonté, le Père a envoyé son Fils, l'unique sauveur et l'Esprit, le « protagoniste de toute la mission ecclésiale » (RM n°21). La *missio Dei* renouvelle l'Église, renforce la foi et l'identité chrétienne (RM n°2). Le missionnaire dirige son regard vers toute personne humaine, afin qu'elle se tourne vers le Christ et prenne conscience de l'originalité salvatrice du Verbe incarné (GS n°22). La mission prend sa source en Dieu (Gn 1, 1 ; Jn 1, 1 ; AG n°2-4) et, même si les disciples sont « associés » à la mission du Christ, elle reste essentiellement l'œuvre de Dieu. C'est l'activité de Jésus et de l'Esprit, au cœur même du projet d'amour du Père (Jn 15, 26-27 ; Mt 28, 16-20 ; AG n°3). Parce qu'elle est l'œuvre de la Trinité, la mission se précise dans la prière et la méditation, là même où le missionnaire est intimement relié à la Trinité, comme l'explique Jean-

Paul II (RM n°91).

Selon M<sup>sg</sup> Gnonhossou, on peut être pauvre et heureux, si l'on accueille un Évangile de la joie (Lc 4, 18-21) et si l'on perçoit l'attention du Seigneur pour les pauvres et les petits. Au Seigneur qui semble l'appeler, Sœur Maria Lee n'hésite pas à demander : « où m'appelles-tu ? » Elle est prête à recevoir humblement l'aide des autres pour discerner la volonté du Seigneur, à lâcher prise et à recevoir une parole d'encouragement, du type : « Maria, confiance ! N'aie pas peur ! Le Seigneur est avec toi ». Pour elle, proposer l'Évangile à des personnes, c'est aussi se laisser évangéliser par elles et vivre tout simplement avec elles. En travaillant auprès de personnes âgées, elle a appris à écouter, à lutter avec elles contre la souffrance de la solitude, l'angoisse des handicaps liés au grand âge, les blessures dans les relations familiales et dans l'Église. En vivant ailleurs dans un pays multiculturel, on apprend à ne pas généraliser. Comme Maria Jésus de Souza, reconnaître que le Seigneur est le Maître de la mission peut être une source de courage. Le témoin doit être convaincu que le Seigneur donnera « les grâces nécessaires » pour relever tous les défis, en particulier pour aider les pauvres, les malades et les vieillards abandonnés.

### **L'avenir de l'évangélisation passe par les échanges entre Églises**

Pour Raymond Rossignol, « l'avenir de l'évangélisation passe par l'échange entre Églises » ; le dynamisme des jeunes Églises doit être partagé et l'Église qui a reçu doit pouvoir donner à son tour. Faut-il dire que les Églises « du Nord » sont réduites à appeler au secours les Églises « du Sud » ? Il ne s'agit pas de faire venir en Occident des prêtres et des religieuses d'ailleurs pour « dépanner », « boucher un trou », comme l'écrit Raymond Rossignol, en critiquant cette manière de voir les échanges. Il s'agit de soutenir le dynamisme missionnaire partout dans le monde, de renforcer les signes de fraternité et de communion, en étant convaincu que « Dieu a distribué ses dons multiples dans une diversité de cultures ».



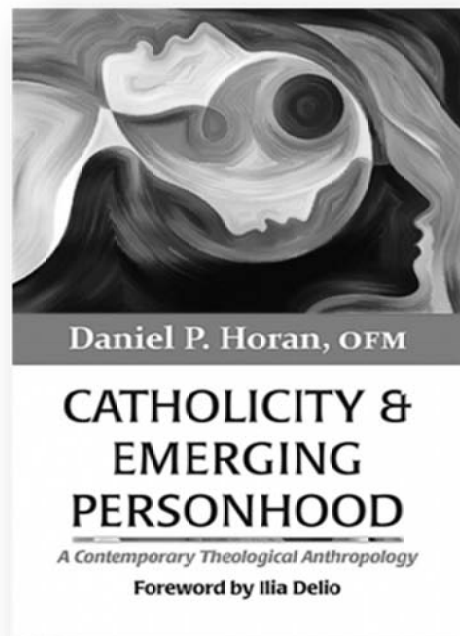
Raymond Rossignol insiste sur l'importance de ces échanges entre Églises : « Le missionnaire étranger ne devrait pas être considéré comme la roue de secours (dont on aurait aimé se passer !) ; son arrivée devrait être vue comme une aubaine permettant de découvrir d'autres façons de concevoir la vie chrétienne, de prier, etc. [...] il est essentiel de lui faire confiance. » Et il s'interroge : « L'Église de France est-elle prête à confier d'importantes responsabilités, et pas seulement au niveau diocésain, à des missionnaires venus d'ailleurs ? »

Comment témoigner de l'amour dans un monde violent, sinon en multipliant les signes de dialogue, de fraternité et de paix ? Les échanges entre Églises, où s'engagent des prêtres, des religieux, des religieuses et des laïcs dans la mouvance de l'encyclique *Fidei donum*, sont des signes forts pour le monde. Celui-ci est de plus en plus confronté au nationalisme et au rejet de l'étranger, du migrant et de toutes les personnes qui quittent leur pays pour aller là où les conditions de vie sont plus humaines, en fuyant les guerres, les persécutions et autres fléaux. Comment coopérer entre Églises et même entre pays pour favoriser la lutte contre la guerre, la pauvreté, l'oppression et les persécutions de toutes sortes ? Comment nos contemporains peuvent-ils s'organiser, ici comme ailleurs et tous ensemble, afin que chacun soit plus libre pour chercher Dieu, travailler avec d'autres pour plus de justice, de paix et d'amour ?

La mission peut être une aventure douloureuse quand les missionnaires se rendent dans des lieux où règnent la guerre et des tensions sociales. Cependant, elle exprime la préoccupation de la Trinité qui veut que toute personne humaine soit sauvée et parvienne à la connaissance de la vérité (1 Tm 2, 3-7). Tous les « disciples-missionnaires », d'ici et d'ailleurs, peuvent témoigner, ici et ailleurs, du dynamisme

missionnaire et des richesses des Églises, de l'espérance et des attentes des hommes et des femmes d'aujourd'hui. Ensemble, tous sont invités à vivre, de multiples manières, les échanges entre Églises, la fraternité, la communion et l'amour révélés en Jésus-Christ.

**(Ref.: *Spiritus*- Revue d'expériences et de recherches missionnaires, N° 224 Septembre 2016, pp. 334 – 342 ; a Spanish translation of this article can be found in the Spanish edition of SPIRITUS; an English translation of this article can be found on SEDOS website in a while)**



**(Gift from ORBIS BOOKS to SEDOS)**

## An Alternate Reading of Genesis Chapter 3 and Mission

*This article shows how Genesis chapter three, in contrast to the traditional interpretation that it is the description of the human fall and the origin of sin, allows an alternate reading. It points out, further, the implications of this new understanding for the theology of mission today.*



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Book\\_of\\_Genesis\\_Chapter\\_3-8\\_\(Bible\\_Illustrations\\_by\\_Sweet\\_Media\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Book_of_Genesis_Chapter_3-8_(Bible_Illustrations_by_Sweet_Media).jpg)

Almost coinciding with the birth of the Bronze Age (ca 3500 BC) one of the first civilizations of the world arose, the Sumerian civilization, in Mesopotamia. The people that developed it are believed to have come from Iran. However, it was established in the midst of a people who dwelt in Mesopotamia as well as other parts of the Near East, such as western Arabia, Syria and Palestine, the Semitic peoples.

Tera, the father of Abraham, the Patriarch of the Hebrew people, belonged to this Semitic race. When he migrated from the Chaldean city of Ur to Haran (Gen 11:31), and later his son Abraham, to Canaan, naturally their mental baggage contained not only elements of Sumerian/ Mesopotamian culture but its religious ideas as well which, eventually, were transformed and refined to be

incorporated as part of the myths of the Bible (Myths understood as in comparative religions), in the context of the Exodus experience and the Covenant.

The migration of peoples in more or less 1900 BC served as the remote background of the oral traditions that, almost a millennium later, were assumed into the written text of the Bible.

The heart of the Exodus experience, the central and identity-creating event in the history of the Hebrews, was the Goodness of the God who delivered them from the Egyptian bondage, under the leadership of Moses. “I have seen their affliction, I have heard their cry” (Ex 3: 7), was the clarion call of this God. As Cardinal Walter Kaspar has pointed out, God’s self-description to Moses in Exodus 3: 14, is: “I am always for you and with you,” (and not, “I am Being”, in Latin: *Ego sum qui sum*,<sup>1</sup> but in Hebrew, *hasa* and not *haya*.<sup>2</sup> It was the beginning, not only of their religious and national identity, but also of the religious text, the Bible. What is brimming all through the Bible is this Goodness of their God. The whole Bible is a narrative of God’s love, reaching out. The biblical salvation history begins with Exodus, not with the creation story that we have in the book of Genesis. Genesis puts us in relation to the ancestors/patriarchs of the Israelites.

Though, traditionally Moses has been considered as the author of the first five

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<sup>1</sup> Kaspar Walter, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and Key to Christian Life*, New York: Paulist Press, 2014, 129.

<sup>2</sup> Julian of Norwich had spoken of the identity of God’s Being as God’s love. Love is not something God has or a property of God. Cf. Brant Pelphrey, *Christ Our Mother: Julian of Norwich*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1989, 25.

books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, based on the studies by scholars like Julius Wellhausen, it is universally acknowledged as the result of different sources.

Thus, contrary to the earlier perception of the book of Genesis as the work of a single author, giving a continuous history of the universe and of human kind, based on internal evidence and style, scholars agree on four sources: J (Yahwist), E (Elohist), P (Priestly) and D (Deuteronomist) which, probably at the time of Ezra (458-390), was collected and codified into a single book by a priestly author.



<https://theconversation.com/how-views-on-priestly-celibacy-changed-in-christian-history-102158>

The different parts of the book of Genesis have not only different sources of origin but also different emphases and subjects. The first chapter of the Book of Genesis was written during exile by the priestly tradition, under the impact of the Babylonian creation myths, but always emphasising the uniqueness of the God of the Hebrews who not only created everything in six days but rested on the seventh day. Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, is different from others, in so far as God rests on the Sabbath, making it sacred as well, which, one could say, is inspired by the Sinai covenant mandate to keep the Sabbath holy (Exo 20:8-11).

An important aspect of the priestly account of the creation of human beings in Genesis 1 is stated soberly: God blessed them saying: “Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and

subdue it...” (1:28). Further, God gave them the right to eat every plant and tree all over the earth as well as all animals of the earth and birds of the air (vs 29 & 30). God was pleased with God’s creation that God found very good.

In contrast, when we come to the Yahwist account of the creation of humans in the next chapter, though God made a suitable partner for man (Gen 2: 18 & 22), the divine plan as expressed in the priestly account, namely, “being fertile and multiplying and filling the earth” (1: 28), remains inoperative in so far as man and woman lacked self-perception and the awareness of their gender difference and sexual potency, notwithstanding the declaration of the divine intent of marriage, where “a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body” (Gen 2:24). The divine design of being fertile and filling the earth, according to the Yahwist account, is realized only through the events narrated in chapter three, underlining human accountability, described as the ethics of responsibility by the renowned Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks.<sup>3</sup>

Though there is an aspect of disobedience in 3:3, disobedience does not exhaust the meaning and purpose of the chapter, rather it has to be seen in context. Here is the challenge for the reader to be open to the unfolding of the narrative with its various nuances.

A major element of the chapter is the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The phrase “to know good and evil,” frequently meant sexual maturity in Hebrew. Taken together with the snake, which symbolized fertility, and the mention of their shame at being naked, it seems clear that through all these,

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal A Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility*, London: Continuum, 2005. One of the challenging ideas of the bible, as Jonathan Sacks describes, is that God invites humans as partners in the work of creation: naming, tilling, caring for the earth, procreation and others revealing God’s faith in humans.

the author was connecting the fundamental human self-awareness and sexuality and achieving the divine plan of filling the earth that was expressed by the priestly narrative in 1:28. However, this is converted into reality through human choice and human collaboration, even as God gives humans the role of naming the animals of the ground and birds of the air (2:19). This is emphasized by a further assertion: “The man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of the air, and all the wild animals” (2:20). By eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge through their own conscious choice, humans become aware of their nakedness (Gen 3:7), i.e. they come to the awareness of their sex difference as well as the purpose of it, they are not just partners or companions anymore.

The narrative continues to flow smoothly with God accompanying humans, showing further, how God prepared Israel’s ancestors, beginning with Abraham.

The Yahwist narrative in Genesis chapter 3 also explains questions about human life such as: why women have pain in childbirth, why people have to work for a living, why we wear clothes, why people are ashamed when naked, why there is death, why snakes crawl on the ground.

Without considering this comprehensive outlook, it was held how Genesis chapter 3 was the description of sin and human concupiscence. The very term ‘sin’ occurs for the first time in the Bible, only in the context of Cain killing his brother Abel (4:7). The creation account of chapter one,

which is of later origin, as we have seen, has no reference to sin.



<https://catholicstrength.com/2017/03/09/the-threefold-corruption-in-the-human-heart-and-its-remedy/>

The whole of the third chapter of the book of Genesis is shrouded in the mystery of sexuality that has played an important role in most religions, either glorifying it like the Sumerian religion, or shunning it as a cause of suffering, like early Buddhism. Though the Bible has a glorifying approach to sexuality (Gen 1: 28; 2: 24), it explains sexuality and sexual attraction, by stating that humans realized they were naked, along with painful procreation, through the beguiling work of the serpent. This is subtly reflected also in the New Testament in so far as Paul imposes periods of abstinence (1Cor 7: 5f) or Jesus’ speaks of making oneself a eunuch for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven (Mt 19: 12).

Sexuality and progeny in the Bible is a source of blessing. Accordingly, to be without progeny, to be barren, is seen as a matter of dishonour and shame. Not only do we come across songs of love in some of the Biblical books, but also the Song of Songs is one of the canonical books of the Bible. Marriage and wedding celebrations are occasions of joy. Jesus went so far as to compare the kingdom of God to an eternal wedding celebration (Mt 22:1 ff)! In the same spirit, some Jewish Rabbis explained how the sacred night of the Sabbath was the most appropriate time for marital intercourse, reflecting divine intimacy!

Sexuality and love are part of creation and are, thus, gifts of God’s goodness. Even as creation, in general, is good, orderly and under control, as coming from God, so too must sexuality be. Humans are responsible for the world and sexual behaviour as they are made co-creators with God. They are

God's deputies. They must exercise this wisely and prudently, according to God's plan. Further, as Joseph Blenkinsopp has underlined, "The Eden story is nowhere referred to in any pre-exilic text, that is, at any time prior to the Neo-Babylonian period."<sup>4</sup>

The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden, according to Genesis chapter three, is not because of human sin, as much as due to God's fear that the humans will become immortal like God by eating the fruit of the tree of life (Gen 3:24)!

True, the Yahwist takes into account the universal perception of the sexual weakness of humans, prompting to sin, affecting even key Biblical figures like David. Under the influence of the Zoroastrian principle of Ahriman, the source of evil as opposed to Ahuramazda, the principle of light and goodness, and the Enuma Elish myth of Enkidu losing the gift of living forever through the intervention of a snake, the Yahwist attributes the eating of the fruit to the influence of the serpent, the principle of evil. The emergence of evil is subsequent to creation by God.

In Genesis 1-11, the deluge is the decisive event after creation, and not the eating of the fruit in Gen 3:1-7. The deluge is an act of un-creation, in contrast to the creative process described in Genesis chapters one and two.

This should not belittle the sexual realism of the Yahwist picturing the profound wonder of sexuality with its joy, overshadowed by the agony of deviation and sin. All these are presented in broad strokes. Ultimately, it is all part of the divine mystery and the awesome human responsibility, as unfolded in the course of the God of salvation.

Such a broader understanding of Genesis chapter three could compliment the one-sided and sin-dominated interpretation of it, and it can lead to a deeper appreciation of the centrality of the divine goodness. Even if chapters one and three are originally independent, in the biblical context, they are complementary. Together, they bring out the divine goodness and faithfulness, along with human frailty and the tendency to sin, yet without disposing of human accountability. That is the role of Genesis chapter three.



<https://mcburnettsmusings.wordpress.com/2019/02/19/jesus-man-of-questions-man-of-miracles/>

## **The Ministry of Jesus with its Consequence**

What has been said holds immense significance for the mission of the church today. It is well known how mission in the past, almost exclusively, was contoured and justified by the presumed fall of the first parents risking the salvation of all humans. The Christ event was read nearly always as remedial to that loss. Anselm of Canterbury, thought to be the Father of western theology by some, went so far as to say that Christ through his blood purchased the souls back for God that had become the possession of the devil when humans ate the apple at his bequest. Some scripture scholars, like Martin Kaehler, saw the gospels especially that of Mark, as a passion narrative with an introduction, ignoring all the beautiful things Jesus did and said! Accordingly, it was said that the redeeming death of Jesus made up for the sin of the first parents and this made

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible*, New York: Doubleday, 1992, 64-65.

God reopen heaven for humanity<sup>5</sup>. The Church became the depository and dispenser of that salvation. The Church's mission was, primarily, to make that salvation available to all humans in every part of the world. Traces of that theology can be detected even in Vatican II's Mission Decree, *Ad Gentes*, when it states: "Though God, in ways known to God alone ... Church is the God intended means of salvation" (n 7), forgetting the very description of God as a "fountain like love" given a few paragraphs earlier (n 2).

Another shortcoming of the interpretation of the Christ-event by linking it to the fall of the humans in paradise, is that it is blind to the scientific data based on human fossils as well as human tools, that human beings existed almost for three million years whereas the whole of the biblical story, as we have seen, spans only for about 5000 years.

There is a radical need to return to the gospels and to the early Church that hardly mentions original sin. The fresh approach to Genesis Three, outlined above, can place one on the same wave length as that of Jesus. Since the time of the return from the Exile there was the hope of the One who would bring about the redemption and restoration of Israel, the Davidic Kingdom, even though the term messiah occurs only in Daniel 9:25. True, one could trace the earliest *promise* of the Messiah in the promise made to David by Nathan, the prophet (2 Sam 7:10-15), in the context of building a Temple for the Lord.

The Messiah is the promised one whom Yahweh would bring about and who would embody the identity and mission of Israel, to be a light to the nations. Through the prophet Isaiah the Lord spoke: "You are my witnesses, my servants whom I have chosen to know and believe in me and understand that it is I" (Is 43:10).

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<sup>5</sup> The protagonists of the fall and atonement theology do not realize that the very fact of procreation is the result of the eating of the fruit. Without that heaven would not be populated except for Adam and Eve!

The kingdom-centred mission of Jesus can be understood only in the context of the Old Testament, beginning with the divine promise of establishing the kingdom forever (2 Sam 7:13). Since then there was the undying faith in God establishing God's reign that will last forever, despite the setbacks suffered through selfish kings, the exile and foreign invasions, including that of the Greeks and the Romans.<sup>6</sup>

With Daniel, the Messianic expectations become more vibrant, with the hope for the One who comes like the God of Israel's scriptures, on the clouds (Dan 7:13). He will receive a kingdom that replaces the earthly kingdom of the beasts (Dan 1:2; 2:37; 7:6). God's eschatological kingdom in its eternal duration will actualize in the Messiah (Dan 2:44; 6:26).



<https://danieltrainingnetwork.org/messianic-expectation-1-biblical-worldview-course/>

Jesus concretizes the messianic expectations by announcing the arrival of the divine reign (Mk 1:14; Mt 4:17), linking it with the great biblical theme of the Jubilee Year, though now it is not just another Jubilee, but the Jubilee, "the acceptable year of the Lord" (Lk 4:19; cf. Lev 25:8ff). Jubilee was the good news primarily to the poor who had lost their land or who had become slaves. Jubilee retrieved the original equality that the Israelites had when they came to the Promised Land. Jesus spelt this out through his announcing the good news to the poor,

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Tim F. LaHaye and Ed Hindson (eds), *Exploring Biblical Prophecy from Genesis to Revelation*, Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2011.

proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and setting at liberty those who were oppressed, through the power of God's Spirit (Lk 4:18-19). In the fourth gospel the Jubilee, the kingdom, is experienced through the deeds of light (Jn 3:16-21).

The biblical idea of salvation and the naming of God or Jesus as saviour has to be understood from this integral sense. No wonder, Cyrus the Persian king who sent Israelites back to their own land is called a saviour (Is 44:24 – 45:8). Similarly, Peter, in the Acts of the Apostles qualifies a man as saved because he is healed of being a cripple by the power of the risen Jesus (Acts 4:5ff).

Jesus makes God and God's reign actual, tangible. "Those who have seen me have seen God" says Jesus (Jn 12:45; 14:9) for he, as the one descended from God, is the only one who has seen God (Jn 1:18; 6:40, 46). By doing the Father's will and speaking the Father's word Jesus becomes the concrete presence of the Father.

Jesus Christ is the vibration of God, God's body language, one may say. Albert Einstein gave the relativity theory, i.e., reality, at the sub-atomic level, is a combination of matter and energy as shown by the perception of light as a shower of particles as well as a wave of energy. Historical Jesus is to be approached not only through the historical critical method, but also through certain 'waves' (*shem* in Hebrew), by looking into the overflow, breath, rhythm and the tenor of his entire ministry. The Father and the Father's reign was his *shem*, his vibration. This should modulate our mission today.

The idea of divine presence is a theme dear to the bible. Already in Genesis chapter 3 we see how God was moving with humans (Gen 3:8). This divine presence becomes more articulate, especially at moments of human helplessness, such as during the Egyptian slavery (Ex 3:7) or during the Hebrew plight through the desert (Ex 40:38), and through

many other ways, finally culminating in the Incarnation of God's Word in Jesus of Nazareth (Jn 1: 14), who is called "Emmanuel, God is with us" (Mt 1:23). The entire ministry of Jesus was not only an articulation of God's presence but simultaneously it was also a manifestation of the way humans become present to God and to each other (Lk 10: 37; Jn 13:34). Through this presence of love, the community of his disciples will produce the same fruit as did Jesus (Jn 15.1). In this connection we can appreciate Peter's summarizing of Jesus's ministry as going about doing good (Act 10:38).

Jesus did create a new community and entrust it with his own mission (Mk 3: 14-15), implying at the same time the need to have a community of the disciples in every culture to continue that mission (Mt 28: 19), nevertheless, Jesus never spoke of a loss of salvation for humanity or that his death was for winning the salvation back,<sup>7</sup> to be made available in the community, the Church. Jesus explained the existence of evil not to a human fall, but to the work of an enemy who sowed the seeds of dandelion among the wheat (Mt 13:24-30).<sup>8</sup> Jesus was ever led by the goodness of the Father, who makes his rain

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<sup>7</sup> Though Jesus in the Markan gospel, as in other gospels as well, constantly seeks to make the Father and Father's reign known, and that he was the path to be followed by the disciples (Mk 10:35-45), the church had to wrestle with the problem why, innocent though he was, was put to death. This brings in the idea of the "ransom" (Mk 10:45) even as the servant's death in Isaiah 53:10 is an "offering for sin". In the same way Paul, struggling to reconcile Jesus's death on the cross with the Deuteronomist pronouncement of curse on the one hanging on the tree (Dt 21:23), would say "Christ ransomed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal 3:13). This is similar to the dialogue in the Matthean story of Jesus' baptism by John. In Mark we have the primitive story of the baptism. But to overcome the embarrassing aspect of the Messiah going through John's baptism of repentance, Matthew introduces the dialogue between Jesus and John justifying Jesus' baptism only "to fulfil all righteousness" (Mt 3:14-16).

<sup>8</sup> Neither did the followers of other religions ever believe that they could be saved only through the church and not through their own religions.



fall on the good and the evil alike (Mt 5:45), the Father who is concerned about the lost one, even as he is similar to an employer of labourers who does not want anyone to be unemployed so as to hire labourers even at the eleventh hour and paying all a just wage (Mt 20:1-16).

When asked as to what must be done to be saved Jesus quotes the love command from Deuteronomy (6:5) and Leviticus (19:18), (Lk 10: 25-28). Similarly, Jesus pronounces how salvation has come to Zacchaeus when the latter has followed the love command (Lk 19: 9), even before his death on the cross!

The logical consequence of his inclusive, compassionate, love-centred and forgiving ministry, in contrast to the practice of the then religious leadership, was the crucifixion.

The litmus test of his passion is that he was put to death on a Roman cross, with the title “King of the Jews.” The execution of Jesus cannot be separated from his ministry. That ministry attracted rejection by the religious leaders of the

time, right from the beginning of his ministry (Mk 2:1ff). In a sense, Jesus prepared his own death by pouring out his energy and compassion on behalf of the poor and the outcaste, the sinners, the suffering, those on the margins. His commitment to justice, his proclamation of universal salvation (Lk 4:25-27), his prophetic mission, forgiving sins, all stirred up the powers of opposition that led him to the cross. He came to cast fire (Lk 12:49), the divine reign that challenges the listener to be open to all, and freeing us from a tribal view of a God who is exclusive, for the privileged, and sticking to rituals and purity.



<https://www.ildolomiti.it/blog/alessandro-anderle/venite-dietro-a-me-vi-faro-diventare-pescatori-di-uomini>

The climax of Jesus’ conflict with the religious authorities was Jesus’ authority manifested in the solemn entry into Jerusalem fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah 9.9, that the religious authorities understood (Lk 19:37-40). That was followed by the cleansing of the temple and teaching in the cleansed temple qualifying the then religious leadership as a den of thieves. “The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people, meanwhile were seeking to put him to death” (Lk 19:47).

### **Mission Today**

The Christ event is a memory and a metaphor. It is the memory of the Incarnation and ministry of Jesus due to which he was executed at Jerusalem during Passover by the Romans at the behest of the religious authority but was raised by God and made Christ (Act 2:22-32). It is at the

same time a metaphor inviting the disciples to follow his path holding his identity, his message and his mission. At the heart of the gospels is the element of conflict leading to death, resurrection and mission.

The Christian reading of the bible and approach to mission today, must be contoured by the divine passion for compassion, divine love that is communicated in creation and in the Incarnation. Hence, the Divine Mission began with creation and not with Incarnation. Even as creation was the divine reaching out (*protensio*, in Latin), through God’s Word and Breath/Ruah, Christ event was God’s self-revelation on human terms (Jn 1:8; 12:45; 14:9). It shines all through the ministry. Zacchaeus, seen as evil, wicked and sinner, becomes significant for God, for he too is a son of Abraham (Lk 19:9). The least meritorious become significant for God.



Biblical narratives, unlike a book on cooking, with its direct meaning, have a depth of inexhaustible meaning that has to be plumbed out. There is always room for further insight and understanding. One need not limit oneself to the past interpretation of Genesis chapter three as a narrative of fall, sin and punishment, but can see it from the perspective of “the fountain-like love of God” (*Ad Gentes* n.2). Bible is faith stories, stories of God’s action in history, rooted in the culture of the people to whom it was revealed. They help one to encounter God, a God who has carved humans in his palms (Is 49:16) and who like a hen tries to bring all under its wings (Mt 23:37).

For the earliest Christians, mission was sharing of an experience. “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life, the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us, that we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you...” (1 Jn 1:1-4). In the light of the resurrection of the Lord the followers of Jesus felt empowered and impelled to share their experience of discipleship.

Scripture scholar John Shelby Spong has argued: “What the gospels tell is the presence of God in a contemporary moment, they interpreted this moment by applying to it similar moments in their sacred story when they were convinced the presence of God had also been real to their forebears in faith ... That was the only way they could understand and process the God presence they found in Jesus that was so powerful.”<sup>9</sup>

Mission today has no other motive than what late Pope John Paul II has said, “To serve human beings by manifesting the love of

God made present in Jesus Christ” (*Redemptoris Missio* 2). In this the Pope was only true to the concluding instruction of Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*: The Church “will share with others the mystery of the heavenly Father’s love” (GS 93), and make all aware of the divine salvation and respond to it.

Obviously, the practical expressions of this service of love, respond to the context. In a religiously pluralistic context like most parts of Asia, the priority will be Inter Religious Dialogue. Where justice is trampled upon and human dignity is thrown to the winds, mission primarily will be an involvement for prophetic justice and advocacy for the margins. It could be empowerment in different forms, and caring for the sick, the lonely, and for creation. It calls for the creation of new communities where they are not existing. In all this, the Christian community tries to be “the letters of Jesus Christ” (2Cor 3:2) or “the aroma of Christ” (2Cor 2:15), thereby becoming “the light to the world” (Mt 5:14). The Christian community becomes the Sacrament of the divine salvation, divine reign made present in Jesus Christ.

As the recent Magisterium of the Catholic Church, especially Pope Francis, has taught, the Church has to become the carrier of the Goodness of God, inviting all to respond to this Goodness, by being good to one another. “The heart of its message will always be the same: the God who revealed his immense love in the crucified and risen Christ” (*Evangelii Gaudium* n 11).

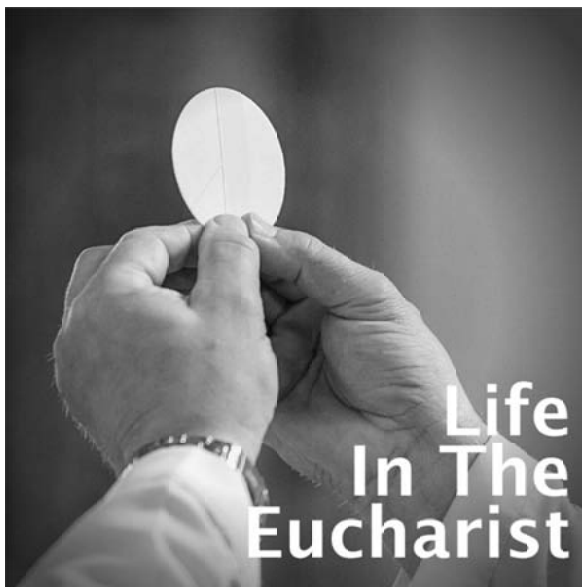
***(We thank the author for sharing this article with our SEDOS readers. It is a chapter of a book he is working on. )***

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<sup>9</sup> John Shelby Spong, *Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes*, San Francisco: Harper Collings, 1996, 19-20.

## Eucharist: Empowering the Church's Mission

The Philippines has been privileged to have hosted two International Eucharistic Congresses (IEC): the twenty-third (Manila: February 3-7, 1937) and the fifty-first (Cebu: January 24-31, 2016). Many parallels between these two congresses can be drawn; however, in the basic vision and orientation of both events, one pivotal theme constantly appears: Eucharist and Mission.



<https://www.sanpedrocenter.org/products/life-in-the-eucharist>

The great theme of the 51<sup>st</sup> IEC in Cebu was: *“Christ in You, the Hope of Glory” The Eucharist, Source and Goal of Mission,*” a theme inspired by the Letter of Saint Paul to the Colossians (1:24-29). The “Basic Text” of the Congress [source of many quotes below] asserts: “This international gathering holds the promise of generating a more courageous and decisive carrying out of the Christian mission in the world and the society that are becoming more and more indifferent and hostile to the faith and to the values of the Gospel. This encounter with Christ in the Eucharist can be a source of hope for the world when, transformed through the power of the Holy Spirit into the likeness of Him whom we encounter, we set

out on a mission to transform the world with our zeal to bring to those who need most the same acceptance, forgiveness, healing, love, and wholeness that we ourselves received and experienced.”

Commenting on the 1937 IEC, Father Catalino Arévalo, SJ, congress participant, has recalled: “the theme of that IEC was (YES!): “The Eucharist and the Missions”! Arévalo gives one example that he remembers from his participation in the “Children’s Day ‘Low’ Mass” at the Luneta on February 6, 1937. Bishop Francis X. Ford, a Maryknoll Missioner, Vicar Apostolic of Kaying, Kwantung, China, made the difficult journey by ship to the Philippines; he preached the sermon at the children’s Mass. Arévalo notes: “He earnestly asked the children present to pledge to be ‘true, valiant soldiers of Christ, ever bravely loyal to Him and His Kingdom’.... Bishop Ford pointed out the urgent need of priests for mission.... Yes, I do remember that morning, not very vividly now. But I think we received much grace from the Lord of the Eucharist, and maybe the grace of vocation was granted or confirmed for a good number of us.”

The 51<sup>st</sup> IEC has “mission significance” for the Philippine Church which is preparing for “the joyous and historic observance of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2021 of the coming of the Christian Faith and of the Christian Church to the country.” In addition, the congress is important for Asia. “Now that Asia is becoming a new center of history in the contemporary world, the holding of the 51<sup>st</sup> IEC in its midst is an opportunity to radiantly manifest the continent’s special and unique calling as a Church of love, communion, and mission. Given the multi-dimensional context in which the Asian Church accomplishes its mission, the

continent has become a fertile field where the mystery of the Incarnation continues to be realized through genuine inculturation that brings the Christian faith to an authentic dialogue with the various Asian cultures, religions, and races.”

This presentation now turns to highlighting the “Eucharist-Mission” dimensions of the Fifty-first International Eucharistic Congress in Cebu City. One finds rich insights both in (a) the Basic Theological Text which shaped the perspectives of the entire congress, as well as in (b) the various speakers who made presentations during the sessions held from January 24-31, 2016. The week-long congress contained rich insights manifesting how the Eucharist empowers the People of God for missionary evangelization.

## **I. FIVE KEY MISSION THEMES PRESENT IN THE IEC BASIC TEXT**

**A. Dialogue as the Privileged Mode of Mission.** In the concrete context of Asia, “the Church, which is always and everywhere a community-in-mission by virtue of her origin and relationship with Christ, is called in a very special sense to undertake her missionary mandate in a spirit of dialogue.” “Dialogue as a particular approach to mission is ... necessitated by the multiracial, multilingual, multireligious, and multicultural reality of Asia on account of which peoples should be in constant conversation among themselves to ensure their peaceful coexistence. This mode of missionary engagement has its root ... in the Trinitarian economy of redemption and call to communion whereby the Father engaged humanity in a loving dialogue of salvation with Himself through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. Dialogue is the way God realized his plan for our redemption in and through His Son who became man, shared our human life and spoke in a human language to communicate his saving message.”

“There is no other way, therefore, for the

Church to realize her missionary mandate from her Master and Lord (cf. Jn 13:14) than by a dialogue of salvation with all men and women.... Vatican II’s vision for the way the Church is to undertake her mission in the modern world likewise reflects a dialogical engagement with diverse races, languages, religions, cultures, and socio-political structures. This is true in a particular way in Asia where she has to engage in dialogue with those who share her belief in Jesus Christ the Lord and Savior, but also with followers of every other religious tradition, on the basis of the religious yearnings found in every human heart.”

Already in their First Plenary Assembly (1974), Asia’s Bishops (FABC) discerned what special configuration this dialogue in the context of mission in Asia should have: “continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions, in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own.” This has been referred to as the “triple dialogue” since forty years ago, but has remained valid until the present time: “dialogue with the cultures of the Asian people, dialogue with their religions, and dialogue with the life-situations of poverty, powerlessness, of suffering and victimhood, which is the lot of a great number of people.”

This triple dialogue has to be undertaken “as a witnessing to Christ in word and deed, by reaching out to people in the concrete reality of their daily lives.” For witnessing to Christ in word, that is, in the explicit proclamation of the Gospel of salvation, the use of stories and other narrative forms holds greater promise of effectiveness, for most Asians are able to relate better with “an evocative pedagogy, using stories, parables and symbols.” The First Asian Mission Congress held in Chiang Mai, Thailand in October 2006 “recalled with fondness and with much gratitude that Jesus himself taught by using parables and insightful vignettes

that revealed the depths of God's reign—that he is God's love story in the flesh! Stories have a special power to make understood even the deepest mysteries of the faith, to transform perspectives and values, to form community, and to establish fellowship."

This dialogue "is not an end in itself; it is in view of sharing and receiving. It disposes one to respect others and to recognize their giftedness. It enables one to listen to what the others are expressing in and through their lives of the goodness of God.... For their part, Christians in dialogue should be ready to offer their faith, to give an account of the hope that is within them (1 Pt 3:15)." For further insights, see: *FABC Papers 130: "Dialogue: Interpretive Key for the Life of the Church in Asia."*

**B. Mission in Dialogue with Peoples and Cultures.** The Church's mission in Asia has to be undertaken in dialogue with a wide variety of cultures. Asia is the world's largest continent and "home to almost two-thirds of the world's population; it is also host to an intricate mosaic of many cultures, languages, beliefs, and traditions." Pope Francis has pointed out the many challenges that are being brought to bear on Asian cultures, among them, the new patterns of behavior caused by over-exposure to various forms of mass media; traditional values, including the sacredness of marriage and the stability of the family, are being undermined by some damaging elements of the media and entertainment industries (cf. EG 62). Also, in many parts of Asia, Christianity has remained a minority religion, often perceived as "too Western" and an "instrument of colonial domination." Thus, by necessity Christian mission in Asia must include "a dialogue between the Gospel and the Christian faith on one hand and the culture of the Asian people, on the other."

This effort, known as inculturation, "is motivated by a vision: that of genuine Christian communities in Asia—Asian in their way of thinking, praying, living, and in

communicating their own Christ-experience to others." Inculturation is not merely one possible option; it is rather a theological and pastoral imperative. "The mystery of the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery are at once the foundation and the model for the deep insertion of local Churches in the surrounding cultures"; this includes many aspects of their life: celebration, witness and mission.

Jesus, the Son of God "became man, a Jew, and thus became part of the history, culture, traditions, and religion of the Jewish people. The Church, too, should incarnate herself in every race and culture where she finds herself. She must become part of every people among whom she ... [is] implanted." Why? It is "for the same motive which led Christ to bind himself, in virtue of his incarnation, to the definite social and cultural conditions of those human beings among whom he dwelt." The Church "must be assimilated into the life of a people that receives her; she cannot remain a stranger to them. She must incarnate herself in such a way that she can be regarded not only as the Church that is in Asia, but as the Asian Church, not only as the Church that is in the Philippines but as the Filipino Church."

This incarnational stance, "rather than jeopardizing the universality of the Church, will even foster such universality. Through the faith of the Church and through the celebration of his work of redemption, Christ continues to incarnate himself in the various races and cultures. He is the universal Savior because he can make himself part of the concrete realities of every particular people and there bring them redemption. The Church, too, is truly universal because she can incarnate herself in the concrete realities of every local Church. When she incarnates herself, she enriches both the local people and herself. Incarnation brings about mutual enrichment to the people who receive the faith and to the Church who incarnates herself."

Inculturation is not a mere clever device to make the Church's faith, worship, and life attractive and acceptable to a local people. "Carrying out a dialogue with the cultures of Asia means to make the message and life of Christ truly incarnate in the minds and lives of our peoples so that they can live in a way that is uniquely Asian, that is, truly as a local Church of Asia. The Gospel is preached to them using living symbols, images, realities, and stories that are part of their day to day existence as a people. They receive the Word, make it the principle of their lives, values, attitudes, and aspirations. They are helped to understand and experience their faith and to celebrate worship in a way that reflects the values they hold dear, using expressions that are part of their culture."



The Church in Asia must regard with openness those elements that "the local culture can contribute to authentic Christian spirituality: a richly developed prayer of the whole person in unity of body-psyche-spirit; prayer of deep interiority and immanence; traditions of asceticism and renunciation; techniques of contemplation found in the ancient eastern religions; simplified prayer-forms and other popular expressions of faith and piety easily available even to simpler folk, whose hearts and minds so readily turn to God in their daily lives. The Spirit is leading the Churches of Asia to integrate into the treasury of our Christian heritage all that is best in our traditional ways of prayer

and worship"; all this certainly applies to the celebration of the Eucharist. This is Asia's gift of prayer to the Church.

**C. Mission in Dialogue with Religions and Religious Traditions.** Closely linked with its multi-cultural reality, Asia is also home to a wide array of religions and religious cultures. Asia is birthplace and host to the world's major religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, as well as of many other spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Shintoism. There are also other traditional or tribal traditions which are practiced with varying degrees. These realities demand that "the mission of the Church in Asia should be undertaken in dialogue with religions and religious cultures."

In her dialogue with the multi-religious countenance of Asia, "the Church takes on the attitude of deepest respect and honor toward the other religions and faiths, acknowledging that these have somehow been instrumental in drawing people to God. As she endeavors to keep strong her rootedness in the Christian faith, she also seeks to better understand the life, doctrine, tenets, and rituals of other religious traditions in order to engage them in a mutually enriching and respectful encounter." It is a fact that these great religious traditions enshrine "spiritual, ethical, and human values that are expressions of the presence of God's word and of the Holy Spirit's continuing creative activity in the world." The profound religious experience as well as the noblest longings of the hearts of multitudes of Asians have been deposited in these religions; present adherents continue to draw meaning, guidance, and strength from them. How can the Church not honor and reverence these faith traditions?

The Church's positive disposition toward other Asian religions "conforms with the incarnational plan of salvation whereby

Christ embraced everything that is human (except sin) in order to assume them within the radius of his redeeming love and power. It was within the religious tradition of Israel that Christ revealed the mystery of God and accomplished his saving mission. His Apostles and the earliest foreign missionaries of the Church had the same dialogical stance in the face of the varied religious cultures of the Greco-Roman world.”

In a dialogical and missionary spirit, the Church enjoins all Christians to assume an attitude of openness toward other religious traditions and discover “with gladness and respect those seeds of the Word which lie hidden among them” (AG 11). Moreover, she encourages Christians “to use cultural forms, teaching, arts, architecture, melodies, languages, and sciences of the other religious traditions, provided that these are not incompatible with the Gospel and the Christian faith, to praise the glory of the Creator.”

This attitude of openness and sharing “will enable Christians to discover and therefore appreciate the heart and soul of their fellow Asians.... Far from placing their Christian faith on shaky ground, this dialogue with other religious cultures and traditions will motivate Christians to find authentic ways of living and expressing their own Christian faith amidst the adherents of other faiths. It will help them discover the many riches of their own faith which they might not have seen before. This dialogue will help them discern in the light of God’s Word how their faith in Christ can be enriched by the other religious traditions, what in these religious cultures must be purified, healed and made whole before being absorbed into the practice of the Christian faith.”

Given the multi-religious context of Asia, the Church’s evangelizing mission will have to emphasize, first of all, direct Christian witnessing of the Father’s love in simple, direct and concrete ways. This means that,

“by living like Christ, Christians and Christian communities are called to draw their non-Christian brothers and sisters to faith in the one God revealed by Christ. Most of the time, this may be in the form of presence and solidarity with people to make them feel cared for and wanted in their poverty and misery. It may be to respond to people’s needs as Christ would do in the Gospel, making them feel welcome.... Perhaps this attestation of God will be for many people the unknown God whom they adore without giving him a name, or whom they seek by a secret call of the heart.”

“In the midst of so much diversity and, many times, of conflicts of various kinds, the Church, by her own life, is called to witness to God’s call to life-giving unity and harmony and be a visible sign and instrument of such unity. Equipped with their Christian faith and commitment, the lay faithful have a distinctive role to play in this dialogue on account of their presence and action in the world—family, politics, education, culture, social environment. In the manner of leaven, they are enjoined to direct the course of human affairs and history to the eschatological fullness that every man and woman of goodwill hopes for.”

#### **D. Mission in Dialogue with the Poor.**

While Asia is rich in culture and its people are rich in human and religious values, “a great multitude of them live in situations of poverty, powerlessness, marginalization, victimization, and suffering. They are poor not because their continent lacks natural and material resources, but because they are deprived of access to material goods and resources which they need to live with dignity and ensure a stable future for themselves and their families. Oppressive and unjust social, economic, and political structures keep them from enjoying the rich natural patrimony of their lands.”

In the face of the particular situation in Asia where multitudes are poor and have

no access even to basic necessities to live a life worthy of their human dignity, “the Church in Asia has a special calling to be a Church of the poor. She must have the poor, the deprived, and the oppressed at the forefront of her life and mission. As in the case of the Church’s dialogue with cultures, the Church’s dialogue with the poor is a theological and moral imperative. The primary reason why the Church has to take on this preferential option for the poor is the very example of Christ who became poor and who identified himself with them in a special way” (cf. Mt 25:40). It is called a “preferential love,” not to exclude anyone but to express that the poor, the deprived, and the exploited have a priority claim to the Church’s attention, services, and resources. “The Sacred Scriptures, both the Old and the New Testaments, are replete with attestations to the fact that the poor have always occupied a privileged place in God’s heart, not the least, in the life and mission of Christ of which the Gospels are eloquent testimonies.”

The bishops of Asia (FABC) have for many years discerned that the Church in Asia must increasingly be “a Church of the poor” with all its implications and consequences.

This implies, first, that “those who have been placed as shepherds of God’s flock in Asia must lead a life of simplicity by which the poor can perceive that their pastors share in their poverty.” By this simplicity of life, which becomes an evident sign of the Gospel in action, “the poor will feel the genuine and heartfelt closeness of their shepherds and will feel more free to run to them for help and guidance.”

A second implication of the Church’s preferential love for the poor is that she should engage in active interventions for the liberation and alleviation of the situation of the poor. “It means being at the service of

human development and of life itself—engaging in the important work of healthcare, education, and peacemaking.... It also means promoting a disposition of solidarity among all—that ‘new mindset’ which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few.”

A third implication of the Church’s preferential option for the poor is that “she has to take a prophetic stance against the negative consequences of economic and cultural globalization, the ongoing impact of foreign debt especially upon the livelihood of the poor, and the environmental damage brought about by scientific, economic and technological progress.” In a word, as the FABC noted in 1974, the Church (and all

local Churches) in Asia are challenged to “a continual endeavor to become more and more the Church of the ‘*anawim*,’ a Church [which] does not merely work for the poor in the manner of a beneficent institution, but labors truly with the poor, sharing their life and their aspirations, knowing their despair and their hope, walking with them in their search for authentic humanity in Christ Jesus.”



In the Church’s dialogue with the poor, “the Eucharist, on one hand, upholds and reaffirms values that negate causes of poverty. It confronts selfishness and greed which are the roots of many forms of injustice, with the self-sacrificing love of Christ.... It confronts oppressive totalitarian leaderships which put political and economic advantages above people, with Christ’s leadership of service—that of the Master and Lord who washed the feet of his disciples (cf. Jn 13:13). Above all, the Eucharist challenges utilitarianism, consumerism, and materialism which treat the poor and the weak as commodities and tools that can be

used for one's gain and pleasure, with Christ's self-donation that breaks and shares oneself so that others may live.... From our participation in the Eucharist, we are sent forth to be witnesses of God's compassion towards all our brothers and sisters."

### **E. Mission in Dialogue with the Youth.**

Asia is considered the continent of the youth since almost two-thirds of its population is young people; it is home to about 60 per cent of the world's young people, many of whom are poor. Thus, mission in dialogue with the youth of Asia entails placing them among the priorities in the pastoral solicitude of the Church. Young people are not only the future of the world but are her present precious treasure. The Church recognizes that "she has to deal with young people not only as the adults of tomorrow but more importantly the reality of today.... With their youthful energies, enthusiasm, and resourcefulness, however, they are even now dynamic agents of change and therefore a source of hope in society and in the Church."

However, the youth "are also the most vulnerable to many destructive forces in the society and often fall victims to structures of exploitation. More than ever before, the realities that impinge upon young people today are both many and varied. Globalization, political changes, and the media explosion radically affect the lives of the youth in every part of Asia." Candidly admitting that many and complex problems confront young people in the continent today, the Churches of Asia are enjoined to "remind the young of their responsibility for the future of the society and of the Church, and to encourage and support them at every step to ensure that they are ready to accept that responsibility."

Suitable and adequate pastoral care should be extended to them, above all, by "sowing the truth of the Gospel in them as a joyful and liberating mystery to be known, lived, and shared with conviction and courage." But since the world now is full of rocks and

thistles, not to mention the scorching heat, youth pastoral care also involves helping young people to be a "good soil" where the seed of God's Word can spring up, take root, grow, and bear fruit a hundredfold (cf. Mt 13:4-9).

Youth pastoral care will mean "accompanying them in their journey, which is not easy, on account of the rapid and drastic changes that are happening around them but also of the dramatic changes they are going through physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually at this stage of human development. This kind of pastoral care is directed toward preparing the ground before the sowing, softening it, making it receptive. It also seeks to strengthen them against the many influences and distractions that compete for their attention and energies and can choke the initial growth of the faith in them." This aspect of pastoral care is necessary even before the sowing of God's Word or simultaneous with it—that they may be good soil where the seed of God's Word can bear abundant fruit.

In Asia, the highly successful World Youth Day began by Saint John Paul II in 1985 has its counterpart—the Asian Youth Day, where young people from the various Asian countries are able to experience a strong sense of being a community through common prayer and Eucharistic celebrations, sharing of life-experiences, working together, sharing meals, and joining one another's songs and dances. By such events, "the youth come to feel that the Church is with them, walking closely with them, believing in what they can do with their youthful energies and good will, empowering them. Journeying with the youth means recognizing the important role that they have in the Church now and as the future of the Church." It is to see the youth as resources and not as problems. The Church's mission today includes directing young people toward the Eucharist for sustenance in the face of their many uncertainties and questions.



## II. PIVOTAL MISSION INSIGHTS FROM PRESENTERS AT IEC IN CEBU

**Cardinal Charles Maung Bo** from Myanmar was the papal legate for the IEC 2016. His message and homily at the opening Mass on January 24, 2016 focused on the theme: “Moving from Eucharistic Celebration to Eucharistic Commitment.” Some of his insights are presented here:

“We are gathered on a global stage, a global table, for a cosmic Eucharist: Eucharist as a Mission in Cebu.... After 79 years of a Eucharistic Congress [1937-2016] in this great land of faith, you have come forward to celebrate this global fellowship.... You have proved your resilience, your faith, rising from all challenges. May this 51<sup>st</sup> IEC be the moment of healing the earth, the wounded planet, and healing the graceful people of this country and everyone gathered here.”

Cardinal Bo asserted: “a short sentence changed history. They are the words: ‘Take and eat, this is my body; take and drink, this is my blood.’ Yes, the most powerful words in human history, the most powerful words in the dialogue of God with man.... The Eucharist is a spiritual jewel.... The Eucharist and adoration is an intense faith encounter with Jesus.... It was Mother Teresa who contemplated this mystery of Presence. She says every Holy Communion fills us with Jesus and we must go in haste to give him to others” [imitating Mary going to visit Elizabeth].

“Adoring Jesus in the Eucharist is also accepting our fellow men and women as created in the image of God. In a world that kills children in the womb, in a world that spends more on arms than on food, in a world that continues to have millions of poor, Eucharist is a major challenge to the whole of humanity. Can we feel the presence of God in our brothers and

sisters?... Our adoration of the Eucharist affirms our inalienable faith in human dignity.”

“Adoration alone may make us good devotees, but being a devotee is one of the easiest things.... Christ is calling us to be disciples, to carry his cross. The Mass of the devotee ends in an hour, but the Mass of the disciple is unending. The Eucharist of the devotee is confined to the clean, decorated altars of the church; the Eucharist of the disciples continues with the streets as altar.... Personal encounter with the Lord occurs in the Eucharist; and, this is precisely the personal encounter with the Lord that strengthens the mission contained in the Eucharist. Yes, Eucharist leads us to mission....”



“Yes, we break bread in an unjust world. UNICEF says that every day 20,000 children die of starvation and malnutrition.... A silent genocide, the biggest terrorism in the world.... The Eucharist and the poor are inseparable. John Chrysostom said: ‘He who said this is my body is the same who said: You saw me hungry and gave me food.’ ... In an unequal and uncaring world, the Eucharist

steadfastly remains the beacon of human equality.... This calls for our commitment to a world of justice. Eucharist calls for a third world war, a third world war against poverty.... The Eucharist will remain a revolutionary flag hoisted everyday on millions of altars, crying for justice like the prophets of old.” “This I think is the clarion call to mission today for all of us.”

“This congress highlights the presence of God through our veneration of the Eucharist.... [May this congress] make us move *from Eucharistic Celebration to Eucharistic Commitment in promoting the Eucharist as Mission*, the Eucharist as the bread of justice to the poor, the Eucharist as the bread of peace in conflict areas.”

**Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil, SDB**, Archbishop Emeritus of Guwahati, India, spoke on the topic: “The Eucharist as Mission: Mission as Dialogue,” emphasizing that in diverse ways, the Eucharist is an invitation to communion among peoples; the Eucharist makes the Church. The “communion of believers” that the Eucharist creates is for mission. Some of his insights follow.

“During this Eucharistic Congress we would like to respond, “Stay with us, Lord,” as the disciples of Emmaus did (Lk 24:29), especially as we feel the challenges of a changing world press hard upon us and the vision of Faith grows dim all around us. His presence makes a difference; it provides the light we need and supplies the strength we lack. We pray that this is what the Cebu Congress will accomplish for us.”

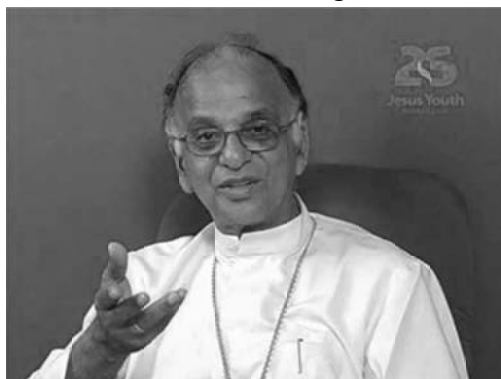
“Saint Ephraem has a powerful image in this connection. He says that the one who eats this bread, eats *fire* and clothes himself with *fire*. The disciples of Emmaus felt as though *fire* was burning in their hearts when they heard Jesus explain the Scriptures to them. No wonder they set out on their return journey the very same night, with a sturdy sense of Mission, after they had broken bread with him (Lk 24:32-33).”

“Benedict XVI says: ‘We cannot approach the Eucharist without being drawn into Mission’ (*Sacramentum Caritatis* 84). Jesus’ example of self-giving conceals irresistible motivating power within, so that everyone who derives strength from him feels drawn to do the same (I Jn 3:16). Faith is not an idle intellectual conviction, it is a driving force toward self-giving, even to the point of self-forgetfulness.”

“My life is the continuation of my Mass,”

Blessed Alberto Hurtado used to say. Yes, the Eucharist overflows into life in the form of generosity, kindness, forgiveness, sincerity, and persevering work. It adds a quality to our decisions at home, in the kitchen, in the bedroom, in places of business and entertainment; in hospitals when the elimination of an unborn child is being contemplated, in the streets where human dignity is dragged to dust....”

“It is often during silent moments before the Eucharist that a believer hears the cry of the poor, a cry that rises to the heavens (James 5:4). It is here that he/she finds energies to sustain a worthwhile struggle. Some have gone to heroic extent in giving their lives in behalf of the weakest as Archbishop Oscar Romero did; he brought his Eucharistic energies to radical social commitment. He combined deep faith, with perceptive understanding of the situation and boundless courage.”



“The Eucharist is eminently the Sacrament of Peace.... The greeting that Jesus gives his disciples is always ‘Peace’ (Jn 20:19). ‘Peace I leave with you.’ He says (Jn 14:27). In fact, he is our peace (Eph 2:14). He urges people to reconcile before offering sacrifice (Mt 23-25).... But, unfortunately there are jealousies and petty quarrels even among Christian workers and fellow-worshippers (I Cor 11:18), as Pope Francis admits. Peace must begin at home: within Christian families and believing communities. However, Eucharistic peace should have a wider significance. Peace is a Mission. We are ambassadors of Christ, befriending the whole of humanity (II Cor 5:18-20). It is our vocation to build bridges, heal wounds, remove ethnic and racial prejudices, and work for the prevention of war.... ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’ Jesus says (Mt 5:9).”

**Cardinal Luis Antonio “Chito” Tagle** spoke on the theme of the Eucharist and Dialogue with Cultures. Using a variety of striking pastoral experiences, he explored the question: “Why does the Church engage in dialogue with cultures?” For him, the simple answer is: *to serve mission*.

Following upon a lengthy analysis of contemporary cultures, Tagle continued: “Let me turn to the Eucharist. The Eucharist offers an experience of another culture, the culture of convocation, ‘*convocare*,’ you are called with others. You are called to be with others, and you are called to be with others in a meal that the Lord hosts. When the Lord hosts a meal, be prepared to be with surprising others. But, in the meal hosted by the Lord, persons recognize a close neighbor, a fellow sinner, a sister, a brother, with a place at the family table. In each one, I see myself, as I see a brother or sister. I also discover myself: sinful but loved; undeserving but invited; shamed but embraced; lost but trusted. This is how Jesus hosted and participated in meals by calling together the most unimaginable combination of people to a community to become his family, his Body because he has convoked them.”

“My dear brothers and sisters, let us begin the dialogue with the culture of alienating individualism in our homes. Restore the family meals. The basic unit of the meal is the table, the common table. Nowadays, the basic unit of the meal is my plate. And, if I have my plate with food on it, I can go anywhere and eat by myself; but, that is not a meal, that is just eating. Individualistic persons know how to eat, but they don’t know how to participate in a meal. May I ask ourselves here: are our sacraments and pastoral services accessible to the poor? Are our parishes welcoming to the deaf and other people with disabilities? Do the wounded, lost, shamed, humiliated, and despised find a

family in our communities?”

Tagle analyzed a special type of culture, following on Pope Francis (EG 53), the “throw-away culture.” In contrast, what “culture” should permeate the Eucharist? “We propose in the Eucharist the culture of gift and sharing.... We could go against the throw-away culture.” Then Tagle asked some pointed questions to counteract the prevalent “use and dispose” attitude.

“Husbands who are here, are you tempted to throw away your wife like a home appliance? She is a gift; don’t throw her away. Wives, are you about to throw away your husbands like junk? Think twice; your husband is a gift. Parents, do you see your son/daughter that gives you some difficulties a thing to be thrown away or do you see him/her as a gift of God? Mothers, do you consider the baby in your womb a burden or a problem to be thrown away or a gift of life? Teachers, will you throw away slow learners among your students, or will you treasure them as gifts, especially when you are teaching in a Catholic school? Politicians, will you throw away people’s taxes for your parties and shopping or guard them as gifts for social service? ... The Eucharist responds to the “throw-away culture” with the culture of gift. You never throw away important gifts, bread and wine, gifts of God, gifts of the earth, and gifts of human hands will become the

gift of Jesus’ presence, a gift of presence....” “Let us behold Jesus in the Eucharist, let us allow him to form in us a community of neighbors, brothers and sisters; no more barriers, only bridges. Let us allow him to open our eyes, to see in creation, in persons, in the poor, the discarded, but truly gift of God; no one thrown away, only gifts to be treasured. This culture of communion and gift shared will make a Eucharistic community, a real, credible presence of Christ in the cultures of the world.”



**Timothy Cardinal Dolan**, Archbishop of New York, addressed the IEC on the topic of the Holy Eucharist and Mary. He began by recalling the words of the great American evangelist, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, who asserted: “the mark of a genuine Catholic is the ability to detect the divine in a mother holding her baby in a manger at Bethlehem and in the bread and wine miraculously transformed at Mass.” Dolan also recalled: “*Pueblo amante de Maria* was the title of the hymn for the International Eucharistic Congress held in Manila eight decades ago.”

Outlining his presentation, Dolan said: “I want to speak of the Holy Eucharist as *sacrifice, meal, and presence*. I’ll explain how Mary animates each of these three ways of looking at the *gift and mystery* of the Eucharist.”

#### *The Eucharist as a Sacrifice.*

“Every time, then, that you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord’ writes Saint Paul to the Corinthians.... There is, you see, an intimate connection between the Mass and the Sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. That’s why we call it ‘the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass!’ ... Now, who was there with Jesus as He was tortured on the cross? ‘Near the cross stood Mary, His Mother.’ ‘At the cross her station keeping, stood the mournful mother weeping, close to Jesus to the last.’ You want to be closer to Jesus on the cross at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass? Be closer to Mary, because she’s right next to him.”



*The Eucharist as a Meal.* “As those two disciples on the Road to Emmaus that first Easter recognized the Risen Jesus when He sat down to eat with them, so do we recognize Jesus when He is with us at the sacred meal of the Mass. As most of the episodes when Jesus appeared to His friends after His Resurrection took place at a meal, so does Jesus now feed us at the Supper we

call the Eucharist. The Mass is our family meal, especially on Sunday. The mother of our family, Mary, is always at the table with Jesus and us. She gave birth to the Son of God in a little town called Bethlehem, which means ‘House of Bread.’ There’s a hint of the Eucharist at that first Christmas! She placed Him in a manger, which means a ‘feed box,’ because Jesus was intended as bread for the world in the Eucharist.”

*The Eucharist as the Real Presence.* After narrating the Eucharistic experience of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Dolan spoke about “Thomas Merton, a drifting, agnostic intellectual at Columbia University in New York. Thomas Merton stopped out of curiosity one day at *Corpus Christi Church*, and was there moved by the obvious faith and piety of the people at Mass. He watched

as they reverently genuflected, bowed their heads at the consecration, and humbly approached Holy Communion. He saw them return to their pews transfixed, obviously in union with Christ. ‘They really believe Jesus is present in that wafer of

unleavened bread,’ he concluded. He would soon enter the Church, and become a Trappist Monk, and one of the great spiritual theologians my country has ever known. Such is the timeless faith of the Church: Jesus Christ is really and truly present in the Holy Eucharist, body, blood, soul and divinity.

Our Blessed Mother is part of this too, my friends. See, at Mass, the mystery of the *Incarnation* continues.... Soon to be Saint Teresa of Calcutta once spoke to priests: “You priests must feel so close to Mary. At her word, the Word became flesh at the *Incarnation*. And, at your words, God the Son takes on the appearance of bread and wine, and is really present with us at Mass.... The Eucharist: *sacrifice, meal, presence!*”

**Cardinal Gaudencio Rosales**, Archbishop Emeritus of Manila, was the main celebrant of the Eucharist on January 26, the third day of IEC 2016. During his homily Rosales reminded the participants that the Eucharist is “more than symbolic, it is the reality”; truly, it is “not just a task, but a mission.”

“Yes, the Eucharist is the memorial of Christ’s saving sacrifice, just like the Passover meal that commemorated the escape of the Jews from slavery under the pharaohs of Egypt. But, Christ’s mandate to ‘Do this in memory of me’ goes beyond repeating Christ’s last meal on earth.... ‘Do this in memory of me’ means that as often as one eats the Body of Christ, he or she announces to others the power of the faith of our Lord Jesus.”

Quoting Pope Paul VI on the powerful example of lived faith, the Cardinal said: “Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst?”



Rosales challenged the IEC participants: “Do the Eucharist. Live the Eucharist. Release the Eucharist from mere celebration! And, allow the Body and Blood of Jesus in you to roam the streets and byways, in jeepneys, tricycles and busses, stores and cafés, offices and schools, in every dining table, in homes where families engage in dialogue. It [such witnessing of Eucharistic faith] could change the world!”

Papal Legate, Cardinal Bo, presided at the IEC closing Eucharist on January 31, 2016. His words emphasized the intimate connections between the Eucharist and the mission of the Church.

“We came from various countries, we spoke

various languages, but like the day of the Pentecost, the Eucharist deepened our relationships. Today, we are returning as brothers and sisters, we are returning in haste like the disciples in Emmaus, whose ignorance was dispelled by Jesus’ breaking the word and breaking the bread. This is a moment of grace.... Each one of you is a living bread.... What is the fruit of the Eucharistic Congress? Renewed apostolic and missionary zeal. Eucharist is the source and goal of our mission!”

Recalling the many presentations during the congress proper, the Cardinal said that he did not have to give additional catechesis. He said: “I want to talk in simple words to the people, especially to families and the young—bring in mercy and love as the core values of the Eucharist.”

“Family, Christ in you is the hope of glory.... Families are the living bread.... The Eucharist is sown and grown in the family. The family is the first communion; the family is the nuclear church. Table fellowship is held regularly in the family.... This Congress needs to end with a strong resolve to strengthen

Catholic families, uphold the priesthood of the laity. Catholic families: Christ in you, you are the hope of glory.”

“Youth, Christ in you is the hope of glory.... What is the status of the youth in our Churches? In many Churches they are the missing generation. Are they around the Eucharistic altars? Are they the lost sheep? Are the shepherds going in search of the lost sheep? Instead of expecting the youth to return to the Church, the Church must return to the youth. A Church that neglects the youth writes its own death sentence.... Our youth deserve understanding, not judgment.” Then, in conclusion, Cardinal Bo summarized his final message, saying: “Eucharist is True Presence; Eucharist is Mission; Eucharist is Service!”

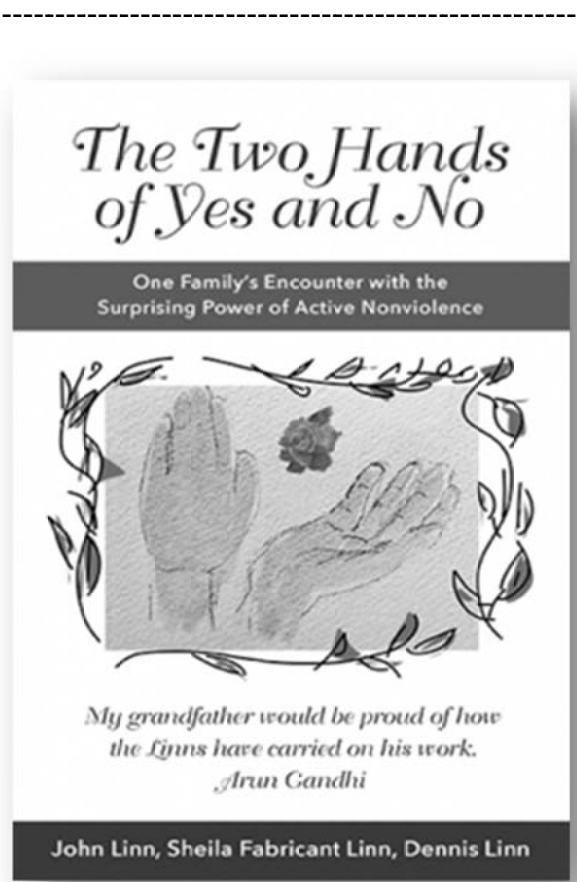
**Ite, Missa Est!** Every Eucharist concludes with a “sending forth” of the assembly. As noted in the “Basic Text” for IEC 2016, this mission-sending character of the dismissal rite is related to the fact that both the words “Mass” and “mission” are derived from the Latin verb *mittere* (= to send). It is also significant that this rite is described as one that missions the people “to go out and do good works, praising and blessing God.”

“It has been said that those who form the assembly are gathered, disposed to listen to God’s word and to take part in the Eucharistic meal worthily, always in view of sending them forth as instruments of unity, heralds of the Good News, and as bread, broken and shared for the life of the world.... At the dismissal rite, they are told, ‘Go, [the assembly] is sent.’ As in the story of the disciples of Emmaus, the encounter with the Risen Christ in his word proclaimed and in the breaking of the bread has the innate power to transform the assembly into enthusiastic and zealous heralds of the Lord. The fellowship they experienced, the Word they heard, and the Eucharistic meal they shared together, are now to be brought into the world in the form of coherent witness.”

“The dismissal at the end of the Mass sends us indeed with an invitation and a charge to work for the spread of the Gospel and to imbue society with Christian values. There is to be an uninterrupted continuity from the Mass just celebrated and our mission as Christians in the world.... With this continuity, the Church always emerges as a mystery of communion and mission inasmuch as the Eucharist which is at the heart of her existence and mission is the sacrament of communion and mission *par excellence*.”

“The celebration of the Eucharist, and every part of it, shows that the missionary responsibility of the Church is instilled in her nature. Being a community-in-mission is part of her identity.” One may slightly modify the classical adage about the mutual generativity of the Eucharist and the Church: *The Missionary Church makes the Eucharist, and the Eucharist makes the Missionary Church!*

*(We thank the author for sharing this article with our SEDOS readers.)*



*(Gift from ORBIS BOOKS to SEDOS)*

## “Proteggere ogni vita”

### Papa Francesco nel Paese del Sol Levante

*Attesa e desiderata, la visita di Papa Francesco in Giappone, del 23-26 novembre 2019, ha lasciato un segno profondo nella chiesa e nella società giapponese. Invitato ufficialmente dal Primo Ministro Shinzo Abe, e più volte dai Vescovi giapponesi, Papa Francesco è stato non solo atteso, ma accolto con rispettoso ossequio, vivo interesse ed entusiasmo.*

Per cogliere il reale impatto di questa storica visita – la seconda di un Pontefice romano dopo quella di S. Giovanni Paolo II nel 1981 – e gli echi postumi



<https://viaggi.corriere.it/eventi/monferrato-iniziative-due-anni-papa-francesco-f33ea630-c73a-11e4-ace1-14c9e44d41cb/>

che essa ha suscitato all'interno della società giapponese e della chiesa locale, mi sembra importante ricordare come primo dato che i cristiani in Giappone rappresentano solo l'1% circa della popolazione (poco più di un milione su una popolazione di 127 milioni) e come, tra di essi, i cattolici giapponesi siano solo lo 0,33% circa (450.000) della popolazione globale. Una piccola minoranza, erede di una storia di persecuzione e di martirio durata secoli. Proscritto nel 1587, e considerato per secoli *jakyō* “religione malvagia”, il Cristianesimo in Giappone cominciò, infatti, a godere di una effettiva libertà solo dopo la fine della Seconda Guerra mondiale, nonostante la pena di morte contro i cristiani – comminata da

Ieyasu Tokugawa nel 1612 - fosse stata abolita nel 1873. Ecco perché il discorso di accoglienza del Primo Ministro, Shinzo Abe, sorprendentemente soffermatosi sulla storia travagliata del Cristianesimo in Giappone e sui secoli bui della persecuzione, appare come un inedito gesto di ‘ufficiale riconciliazione’ dello Stato e del popolo giapponese nei confronti di questa sua indomita minoranza. Come tale, il Discorso

di Shinzo Abe avrebbe meritato una maggiore attenzione anche da parte dei media.

Altri due dati si impongono per la loro rilevanza: il processo di

“invecchiamento” che affligge l'intera società giapponese – e di conseguenza anche la comunità cristiana – e l'inquietante fenomeno del «*shūkyō banare*» (disaffezione e allontanamento dalla religione) che attraversa tutte le Tradizioni religiose, non ultima la Chiesa Cattolica. Negli ultimi decenni, il numero dei fedeli, e il numero dei battesimi di adulti e bambini, è andato decrescendo provocando un processo di involuzione generale che ha coinvolto anche gli Istituti religiosi e missionari costretti a chiudere e ridimensionare opere e iniziative per mancanza di vocazioni. In controtendenza, è vero, si pone la presenza degli oltre 500.000 cattolici provenienti da Filippine, Vietnam, America Latina e altri

Paesi che negli ultimi decenni sono confluiti come nuova linfa vitale nel “piccolo gregge” della Chiesa giapponese. Preziosa testimonianza dell’universalità della Chiesa, questa cosmopolita presenza richiede però alla chiesa locale un non facile processo pastorale di assimilazione e integrazione.

È in questa complessa situazione sociale, ecclesiale e missionaria che il “*Pellegrino missionario*” Francesco ha fatto risuonare con vigore il messaggio evangelico, mediato dal motto che ha preparato e accompagnato la sua visita: “*proteggere ogni vita*”. Nella sua immediatezza, questo motto – che la Chiesa locale ha valorizzato come una singolare opportunità di annuncio – ha fatto breccia nel cuore e nella mente del popolo giapponese. Un efficace servizio di informazione ha permesso a tutti, fedeli cattolici e non, di essere a conoscenza dei dettagli della visita papale; di seguirla, momento per momento attraverso i mezzi di comunicazione o attraverso la partecipazione diretta. Ad esempio, nella diocesi di Fukuoka, dove risiedo, tutte le parrocchie hanno organizzato il trasporto di coloro che desideravano partecipare alla celebrazione eucaristica presieduta dal Santo Padre a Nagasaki il 24 novembre. Per circa un mese, una mostra allestita nei locali della Cattedrale ha presentato, oltre all’evento della visita papale nei suoi vari momenti, numerosi temi relativi alla vita e alla attività della Chiesa Cattolica in Giappone e nel mondo. Grandi schermi collocati anche all’esterno della Cattedrale, hanno permesso a quanti non avevano potuto recarsi nei luoghi ufficiali della visita papale di seguirla visivamente ed emotivamente nelle sue varie tappe.

### **“Proteggere ogni vita”**

In diverse occasioni, Papa Francesco ha avuto modo di ricordare come, da giovane gesuita, avesse sognato e desiderato venire in Giappone come missionario. Anche ai Vescovi giapponesi che l’hanno accolto in Nunziatura, subito dopo il suo arrivo a

Tokyo il 23 novembre sera, ha ripetuto: «*Non so se lo sapete, ma fin da giovane ho provato simpatia e affetto per queste terre. Sono passati molti anni da quell’impulso missionario, la cui realizzazione si è fatta attendere. Oggi il Signore mi offre l’opportunità di essere tra voi come pellegrino missionario sulle orme di grandi testimoni della fede*».

Riferendosi poi al motto del suo viaggio apostolico, “*proteggere ogni vita*”, Francesco ha coraggiosamente chiamato per nome i problemi che attraversano la società giapponese minacciandone la vita: solitudine, disperazione, isolamento, bullismo, aumento degli aborti e dei suicidi, forme di alienazione e disorientamento spirituale.

«*Proteggere ogni vita* – ha ricordato ancora ai Vescovi – può ben simboleggiare il ministero episcopale in quanto *«il vescovo è colui che il Signore ha chiamato in mezzo al suo popolo, per restituirlo come pastore capace di proteggere ogni vita, e questo determina in una certa misura lo scenario a cui dobbiamo puntare*». Uno scenario che Papa Francesco non ha mai perso di vista durante il suo breve ma intenso soggiorno. “*Proteggere ogni vita*”, infatti, è stato non solo il leitmotiv di tutto il suo viaggio apostolico ma anche l’imperativo morale che ha voluto lasciare alla Chiesa e al popolo giapponese, un popolo che, pur erede di una cultura ancestrale che sempre ha riconosciuto nella vita un dono divino, rischia ora – a causa del secolarismo e del materialismo imperante – di smarrirne il senso e il valore.

### **Immoralità delle armi nucleari**

Il 24 novembre, secondo giorno della sua visita, il “*Pellegrino missionario*” Francesco ha attraversato il Giappone dal nordest al sud-ovest e viceversa: Tokyo, Nagasaki, Hiroshima e, nuovamente, Tokyo. Tappe evocative di drammi e momenti storici indelebilmente scolpiti nella coscienza personale e collettiva dei giapponesi. A Nagasaki, di sul luogo dell’epicentro dell’atomica, sotto una



pioggia battente, ricordando *«l'orrore indicibile subito nella propria carne dalle vittime e dalle loro famiglie»*, Papa Francesco non ha temuto di alzare la voce contro la corsa agli armamenti. Ribadendo quanto già aveva detto nel *Messaggio al Giappone* prima della sua partenza da Roma, e cioè che *«usare armi nucleari è immorale»*, Francesco ha ripetuto ai presenti: *«Non possiamo mai stancarci di lavorare e di insistere senza indugi a sostegno dei principali strumenti giuridici internazionali di disarmo e non proliferazione nucleare, compreso il Trattato sul divieto delle armi nucleari»*. E poi ancora: *«Nella convinzione che un mondo senza armi nucleari è possibile e necessario, chiedo ai leader politici di non dimenticare che queste non ci difendono dalle minacce alla sicurezza nazionale e internazionale del nostro tempo»* (Nagasaki, *Messaggio sulle armi nucleari*).



<https://www.sabinopaciolla.com/papa-francesco-armi-nucleari-ed-energia-nucleare/>

Con non meno vigore, Papa Francesco ha lanciato al mondo lo stesso appello da Hiroshima dove nella serata dello stesso giorno, 24 novembre, un gruppo di *hibakusha* (sopravvissuti al bombardamento atomico), una delegazione interreligiosa e 1300 persone si sono radunate al Memoriale della Pace per ricordare le vittime della prima atomica. Ho potuto partecipare a questo momento di grande intensità e cogliere il fremito dei presenti alle parole di Papa Francesco: *«Con convinzione desidero ribadire che l'uso dell'energia atomica per fini di guerra è, oggi più che mai, un crimine, non solo contro l'uomo e la sua*

*dignità, ma contro ogni possibilità di futuro nella nostra casa comune. L'uso dell'energia atomica per fini di guerra è immorale, come allo stesso modo è immorale il possesso delle armi atomiche. [...] Come possiamo parlare di pace mentre costruiamo nuove e formidabili armi di guerra?»* (Hiroshima, *Incontro per la pace*).

Appelli forti che, raccolti e rilanciati dai media, hanno fatto breccia nell'opinione pubblica in un momento in cui, in Giappone, il dibattito sul nucleare ha assunto nuovi e controversi contorni. I giapponesi, infatti, unico popolo ad avere sperimentato la tragedia dei bombardamenti atomici e ad aver rinunciato, per Costituzione, alla produzione e al possesso di armi nucleari, e persino al diritto di avere un esercito, eccetto che per la difesa del territorio, hanno fortemente vibrato alle appassionate parole di Francesco riconoscendo nelle sue parole un messaggio universale. Nondimeno – di fronte alla complessa situazione internazionale e alle reiterate minacce nucleari della vicina Corea del Nord – non mancano gruppi che chiedono di rivedere la Costituzione per abilitare il Paese ad avere – come tutti gli altri Paesi – un esercito capace di difendere il territorio, di prevenire eventuali attacchi e di intervenire nel gioco degli equilibri internazionali. In seguito ai disastri ecologici e ambientali dovuti all'incidente di Fukushima, inoltre, il confronto verte attualmente anche sull'opportunità o meno dell'uso civile di centrali nucleari, alle quali il Giappone ricorre per necessità industriali.

Quale impatto avrà il messaggio di Papa Francesco su questa delicata controversia è difficile da prevedere. Non v'è dubbio, però, che i discorsi pronunciati a Nagasaki e a Hiroshima, sui luoghi degli eccidi atomici, e a Tokyo, durante l'incontro con le vittime del triplice disastro di Fukushima e con il Corpo diplomatico, rimarranno testi di riferimento imprescindibili. Come egli stesso ha peraltro ricordato a Nagasaki: *«Nel luglio scorso, i vescovi del Giappone hanno lanciato un appello per l'abolizione delle armi nucleari, e in ogni mese di agosto la*

*Chiesa giapponese celebra un incontro di preghiera di dieci giorni per la pace». Un impegno coraggioso che pone la piccola Chiesa cattolica in Giappone in posizione di avanguardia in una controversia difficile e complessa.*

I numerosi articoli apparsi in questi mesi su varie riviste giapponesi sono una prova dell'impatto che il messaggio di Francesco ha avuto e continua ad avere all'interno della Chiesa e del popolo giapponese.

*ogni giorno il messaggio proclamato da San Paolo Miki dalla sua croce, e a condividere con tutti gli uomini e le donne la gioia e la bellezza del Vangelo che è Via, Verità e Vita (cfr Gv 14,6)» (Nagasaki, Omaggio ai Santi Martiri).*

Senza dimenticare le migliaia di martiri il cui sangue, anche oggi, bagna tanti Paesi, Francesco ha esortato ad alzare «la voce perché la libertà religiosa sia garantita a tutti e in ogni angolo del pianeta»; ad alzarla «contro ogni manipolazione delle



<https://www.vaticannews.va/it/papa/news/2019-11/thailandia-giappone-magistero-papi.html>

### **Alle radici cristiane del Giappone**

Cuore della cristianità giapponese, Nagasaki conserva non solo la memoria del martirio atomico, ma, anche quella delle migliaia di martiri cristiani che hanno dato la vita per Cristo e il suo Vangelo in due secoli di feroci persecuzioni. A Nagasaki, sulla collina di Nishizaka, è venerato il luogo dove, il 5 febbraio 1597, furono crocifissi i primi ventisei Martiri. Qui si è recato Papa Francesco per onorare la loro memoria e per invitare la Chiesa che è in Giappone ad annunciare instancabilmente il Vangelo della vita: «*Che la Chiesa, nel Giappone del nostro tempo, con tutte le sue difficoltà e promesse, si senta chiamata ad ascoltare*

*religioni, operata dalle politiche di integralismo e divisione e dai sistemi di guadagno smodato e dalle tendenze ideologiche odiose, che manipolano le azioni e i destini degli uomini» (Idem).*

L'appello a «*proteggere ogni vita*» è emerso con forza anche nelle due omelie tenute a Nagasaki, il 24 novembre, e a Tokyo, il 25 novembre, durante le celebrazioni eucaristiche che hanno rispettivamente raccolto più di 35.000 fedeli a Nagasaki e oltre 50.000 a Tokyo. Celebrate negli Stadi cittadini, le due celebrazioni, trasmesse in diretta televisiva, sono stati momenti di grande impatto anche mediatico. Erano presenti non solo cristiani giapponesi e cristiani immigrati, venuti dalle varie

diocesi, ma anche fedeli di altre Tradizioni religiose.

L'intenso programma di Papa Francesco è poi continuato a Tokyo con la visita privata all'imperatore Naruhito, l'incontro con il Primo Ministro Shinzo Abe, le Autorità e il Corpo Diplomatico, con i giovani, cristiani e non cristiani, riuniti nella cattedrale di Santa Maria, e, infine, con i confratelli Gesuiti dell'Università Sophia.

Un viaggio apostolico breve ma intenso di cui proprio il *"Pellegrino missionario"* Francesco ha offerto un'autorevole chiave di lettura nel discorso rivolto ai Vescovi: *«Sappiamo che in Giappone la Chiesa è piccola e i cattolici sono una minoranza, ma questo non deve sminuire il vostro impegno per una evangelizzazione che, nella vostra situazione particolare, la parola più forte e più chiara che possa offrire è quella di una testimonianza umile, quotidiana e di dialogo*



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqT-yeWJOx8>

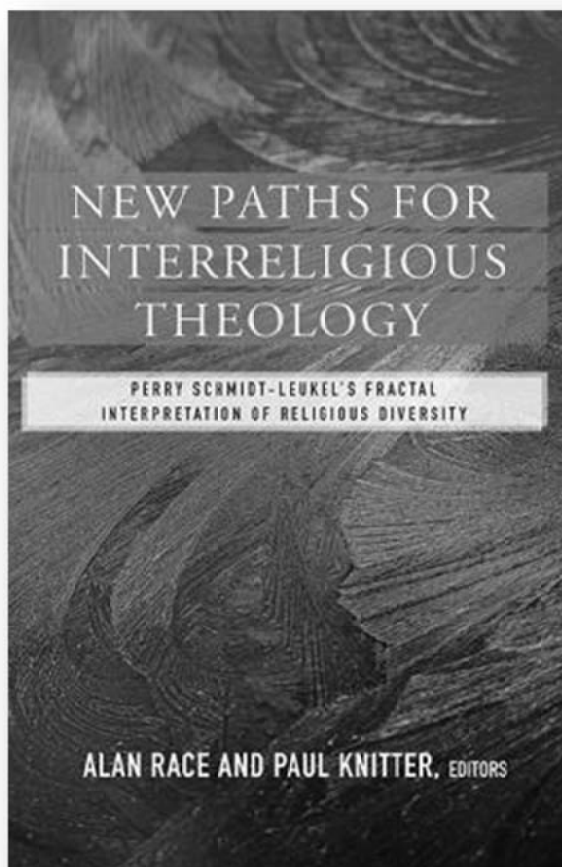
*con le altre tradizioni religiose. L'ospitalità e la cura che dimostrate ai numerosi lavoratori stranieri, che rappresentano più della metà dei cattolici del Giappone, non solo servono come testimonianza del Vangelo in seno alla società giapponese, ma attestano anche l'universalità della Chiesa, dimostrando che la nostra unione con Cristo è più forte di qualsiasi altro legame o identità ed è in grado di raggiungere tutte le realtà».*

A distanza di mesi dall'evento, penso si possa legittimamente parlare di un "effetto Francesco". Molti cattolici giapponesi hanno

una speciale simpatia per Papa Francesco, per i suoi gesti originali e sorprendenti, per la dimensione concreta e pratica della sua testimonianza di fede particolarmente in sintonia con la psicologia giapponese. Proprio questo suo esempio, questo suo stile di vita e di testimonianza cristiana si stanno rivelando

"semi" preziosi, capaci di stimolare un rinnovato impegno missionario nella comunità cattolica in Giappone.

Maria De Giorgi, mmx  
*Missionaria Saveriana in Giappone*  
(Centro di Spiritualità e Dialogo  
interreligioso Shinmeizan)



*(Gift from ORBIS BOOKS to SEDOS)*

## The Virtue of Asceticism

*Giving up chocolate? Deleting your Facebook account? We all choose to mark Lent in different ways and more often than not focus on abstaining from something we enjoy, but is this always good for us? Nicholas Austin SJ explores how our attempts at an ascetic way of life for forty days each year can go wrong if our motivations are not rooted in the wisdom of the Christian tradition. How can we rediscover the virtue of asceticism?*

So what have you decided to give up for Lent? We often hear that the important thing is not to give something up, but to do something positive. But it's strange, isn't it, that the feeling still sticks that Lent is *really* about giving up stuff? Giving up chocolate, giving up alcohol, giving up desserts, giving up cigarettes, giving up TV, giving up meat on Fridays.... For better or worse, we tend to ask ourselves not 'What am I going to do, in a positive way, for Lent?' but 'What am I going to give up?' So why are we so fixated on fasting, abstaining, giving stuff up?

### The way of asceticism

'There are only two philosophies of life', Fulton J. Sheen once said, 'one is first the feast and then the headache; the other is first the fast and then the feast.' Today, more than ever, the time is ripe for a recovery and renewal of this second 'philosophy', the way of asceticism.

At a surface level, asceticism (the constellation of the practices of voluntary self-denial such as fasting from food) does not hold much attraction for us today. In the film version of *The da Vinci Code*, the crazy and murderous albino monk Silas is depicted whipping himself and wearing a chain wrapped around his leg that he tightens so as

to draw his own blood. What such a picture conveys is fanaticism, self-hatred and a religious practice divorced from all that is holy, healthy and good.

Yet there are numerous signs in our culture today that, at a deeper level, there is a desire for a freeing asceticism, if only we knew how to practise it. In the era of retail therapy and consumerism, we hear about people who have discovered the benefits of downsizing, de-cluttering and material simplicity. Caught in the incessant and hectic pace of modern life, we yearn for a way to step off the conveyor belt of busy-ness and find some space just to be, to be with others, to be with God. Drowning in an infinite sea of calories, we buy into a multi-billion pound yet apparently ineffective diet industry, with its promises to 'naturally' cleanse the toxins from our bodies, 'juice fasting' and a thousand varieties of quasi-ascetical practices. Aware of our propensity to unintentional overuse of the internet and our other communication gadgets, we yearn for the freedom that comes from being 'unplugged', but can't quite bring ourselves to pull the plug, even for a few hours. Is there, then, a way to recover from the Christian tradition the wisdom for an authentic practice of asceticism that can lead to the freedom and prayerfulness that, now more than ever, we yearn for?

### Three distortions

The first thing to notice is that the Christian tradition is quite aware that fasting and abstinence can go wrong in a number of fairly predictable ways. I shall note three prominent distortions to which asceticism is especially susceptible, and the remedies that the tradition prescribes.

## 1. *The distortion of excess*

The first kind of danger to which asceticism is prone is that of *excess*. Fasting for long periods, for example, can lead to self-inflation and pride at one's own achievements, and end up being counter-productive. As almost anyone who has every tried dieting knows, excessive fasting is quickly followed by the binge. At its extremes, it can even be damaging to one's health, as it was for Saint Ignatius of Loyola shortly after his conversion. Later, as he grew in discernment and maturity, he realised that such heroic fasting was not what God desires.

The traditional corrective to excessive fasting is the doctrine of the 'mean'. The mean is the middle-way between too much and too little. A helpful analogy is a musical instrument: to keep it in tune, the strings should be neither too taut nor too relaxed, but in the mean. Saint Thomas Aquinas points out that even fasting is a matter of the mean: one should not fast to such an extent that one damages one's health, or becomes too weak to perform the tasks of one's occupation, for that would be to go to excess. Following the Stoic philosophers, he recommends the gradual approach: start small, approach the mean bit by bit. It is better to be patient, to be gentle, rather than attempt the spectacular, and risk the equally spectacular crash.

Today, we are so far towards the other extreme that excess in fasting is hardly our primary danger. Thomas makes a challenging statement that may surprise us today, but is worthy of our serious consideration: fasting, he says, is not merely a church law, but a requirement of human nature itself. In other words, an adult human being cannot hope to find the right balance in life, can't hope to find the mean, unless by a regular practice of fasting. Otherwise, our desires for things that are good in themselves overrun their bounds and end up enslaving us.

Finding the mean in asceticism today, the mid-point between excess and laxity, is a task that will require attentiveness to the wisdom of the tradition as well as an exercise of the Christian imagination. The new asceticism today will not involve just fasting from food, but from any aspect of modern life in which compulsion starts to take over and we lose our freedom, our balance. If I buy stuff as a means of feeling better, perhaps I need to fast from shopping; if I find myself obsessively checking *Facebook* and *Twitter*, or checking my texts or emails, perhaps I need to fast from that; and so on. In any case, what we need is a *creative* fidelity to the traditional practices of fasting and abstinence, aware that the asceticism of ages past needs to be recovered but also adapted to a new age of consumerism, internet and environmental degradation.

## 2. *The distortion of dualism*

The second way that asceticism can be distorted is more subtle, and therefore more insidious. In Catholic spirituality, those seeking progress in the spiritual life were often encouraged to 'mortify' their flesh, literally put it to death. Of course, the 'flesh' here refers not to the body itself, but to our sinful nature. Nevertheless, the impression unintentionally conveyed, at least sometimes, was that the spiritual life means rejecting all that is of the body. In other words, there is the risk of a *dualism* that sees the soul as good, and the body and the material world as evil.

Such a dualism is of course strongly discordant with some of the basic tenets of the Christian faith, the doctrines of Creation, Incarnation and Resurrection. We believe that, at the creation, God was able to look at the world he had created and see that it was 'very good' (Genesis 1:31). We believe that in Jesus Christ, God became flesh and so sanctified the human body. We believe that, on the last day, the body as well as the soul will be taken up into Christ's resurrection.

There is no place within our faith, then, for a rejection of the body and the material world as impure.

The risk, then, is that our ascetical practices unconsciously become infected by a disdain for our bodies, our passions, our sexuality, which should be seen as a precious gift from God. The point of an authentically Christian asceticism is not to free the soul from the body, nor even to repress the body and its impulses, but to raise these to a truly spiritual level, to integrate them into the spiritual journey towards God.

**3. The distortion of empty religiosity** In order to identify the third and final distortion of asceticism, we need to attend to the compelling words of the prophet Isaiah (58:5-6):

*Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?*

Here the prophet attacks an *empty religiosity* that attempts to curry favour with God without attending to the basic duty of justice towards the poor. Empty religiosity, by focusing exclusively on external religious practice, is an escape from the real world: the power of religious practice to open the heart to a transformation leading to a deeper love of God and neighbour is lost.

Yet we should not misread Isaiah's critique as an attack on the practice of fasting as such. Isaiah was speaking in a time when ascetical practices were taken for granted, part of the fabric of everyday life. He called people to realise that their religious practices had no meaning unless there was a union between them and the way they treated others. Today, we are often tempted in a different way, to assume that true religion is simply about how we treat others, and that we no longer need a spirituality incarnated in

concrete religious practices such as fasting. In this regard, we may recall the memorable criticism by the anthropologist Mary Douglas of the view that exterior practice has nothing to do with true spirituality or authentic religion:

*For it is a mistake to suppose that there can be religion which is all interior, with no rules, no liturgy, no external signs of inward states. As with society, so with religion, external form is the condition of its existence*

...  
(Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* [New York/Washington: Praeger, 1966], p.62.)

What the prophets call us to is not a rejection of ascetical practice, but an authentic fasting that involves us body and soul. Then fasting will become, not an escape from the real world, but a way of coming closer to those who practise, in the words of Gandhi, an 'eternal, compulsory fast' simply because they do not have enough to eat.

**Why fast?** As we have seen, if we are to engage in a healthy and holy asceticism today, we need to attend the wisdom that we find within our tradition, that can help us to avoid the pitfalls of *excess*, of *dualism* and of *empty religiosity*. Equally importantly, the tradition teaches us to avoid over-corrections that lead to a disembodied spirituality or a too relaxed approach. But what, ultimately, are the reasons for asceticism? What is the ultimate point?

Most obviously, fasting can help us to find a proper authority over ourselves. Today we have a thousand ways of making ourselves feel good: I know, I'll eat something nice, or have a drink, or surf the internet, or check whether a friend has texted me, or turn on the TV, or listen to my *iPod*, or go clothes shopping, or buy something from *Amazon*, or play a computer game. All of these things can be good, but if we continually use them to make ourselves feel better, we can become

slaves to the things we enjoy. When we don't have them, we crave them. When we lack them, we feel depressed. When we realise we shouldn't overdo it, we can't help ourselves. So in Lent, when we give stuff up, we exercise authority over *it*, instead of letting *it* control us. We try to unchain ourselves. We try to become free.

But there's a deeper reason to fast. 'Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days.' (Luke 4:1) Recently my class of university students read the autobiography of Dorothy Day, the social activist and foundress of the *Catholic Worker Movement*. Some people consider her a modern-day saint. The book tells of how, as an adult, she became an atheist, but then was gradually led back to prayer and to God, so that she converted to Catholicism, and committed her life to working for the poor and for social justice. But she entitles the book, *The Long Loneliness*. And she describes how, at times, she experienced a terrible loneliness in her life. She longed to be with people, with those she loved, and felt the pain of separation and grief. But despite the pain of loneliness she experienced, it's as though she realised her loneliness was not all negative. In that experience of being lonely, she longed to be with the poor and she longed to know God.

So I asked my students once they had read the book: 'Can you relate to that experience of loneliness? Do you ever spend time alone?' And the responses were striking. One student confessed that those parts of the book about loneliness terrified her. Another student said that she spends virtually no time alone, and when she is alone, she has some electronic device to turn to: her mobile phone, or the computer – checking *Facebook* or email. Another said he had begun to learn to deliberately make time without his computer or phone, so that he could have time to reflect or think. And another said the only time he really got to be alone was when he went for a run, but that such time was

precious to him precisely because it was his only time to think.

The fact is that it is difficult to withdraw into the desert with Jesus today. We live in an age of distraction, where we have a thousand different ways of filling up that void of loneliness. And to some extent, that means we're missing out. A recent report in the United States surveyed the use of electronic devices by children aged 8 to 18. It wanted to know how much children are plugged-in to an *iPod* or a television or the internet or a mobile phone and so on: how much time a child spent exposed to the media. A few years ago it was over 6 hours a day; today, the American child spends, on average, 7 hours and 28 minutes a day plugged in to some electronic device. That's over 50 hours a week.

'Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days.' And, during his public ministry, Jesus deliberately, repeatedly, persistently, withdrew at times from the crowds in order to be alone. Especially when things were most busy and demanding, he developed the asceticism of alone time. He spent time alone, in lonely places, in order to spend time with God.

And so I think this Lent is an invitation for us to be led by the Holy Spirit into the desert, to accompany our Lord as he withdraws into a lonely place. This Lent is a time for us to unplug a little bit, to cultivate that interiority, to use an old-fashioned but valuable word. Above all, this Lent is a time for us not to be afraid of choosing to be alone, but to trust that, even in our loneliness, indeed especially there, the Spirit of Jesus is with us, drawing us to the Father.

**(Nicholas Austin, SJ, teaches Ethics at Heythrop College, University of London. This article is taken from: [https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20110308\\_1.htm](https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20110308_1.htm))**

## SEDOS RESIDENTIAL SEMINAR

*Centro Ad Gentes, Nemi (Rome)*  
4 May - 8 May 2020

# *Living Green Mission*

TIME	MONDAY, 4/5/2020 (opening session)
15:00 - 16:00	Arrival — Check in (Bus departure at 2.00 p.m)
16:00 - 16:30	Coffee / Tea Break
16:30 - 18:30	Opening Para-Liturgy (outside) Opening Address: Fr. Tesfaye T. Gebresilasie, MCCJ, SEDOS President Orientation: Peter Baekelmans, CICM, SEDOS Executive Director OPENING SPEECH: Fr. Joshtram Kureethadam, SDB <i>The Ten Green Commandments of Laudato Si'</i> Dicastery for Integral Human Development
19:30 - 20:30	Supper/ Free time
20:30 -	Getting together
TIME	TUESDAY, 5/5/2020 Education aspect
07:30 - 08:30	Breakfast / Free time
08:30 - 08:45	Prayer in Portuguese / Orientation — Moderators:
08:45 - 10:15	Sr. Helen Grealy, RC, and Fr. Brian Grogan, SJ <i>Loving Sister Earth</i> Loving Sister Earth Movement, Ireland
10:15 - 10:45	Coffee / Tea Break
10:45 - 12:15	Fr. Petero Matairatu, SM <i>The practices and principles of the Tutu Rural Training Project</i> Director of Marist Rural Training Centre, Taveuni Island, Fiji
13:00 - 15:00	Lunch / Free time — Personal reflection
15:00 - 16:00	Discussion in small groups
16:00 - 16:30	Coffee / Tea Break
16:30 - 17:30	Panel Discussion I <i>How does my “living green” influence the way I live Mission?</i>
18:15 - 19:15	Eucharistic Celebration (all together)
19:30 - 20:30	Supper / Free time
20:30 - 21.15	Video: <i>The Salt of the Earth</i> (2014) Sebastien Salgado
TIME	WEDNESDAY, 6/5/2020 Sustainability aspect
07:30 - 08:30	Breakfast / Free time
08:30 - 08:45	Prayer in Spanish / Orientation — Moderators:
08:45 - 10:15	Prof. Yvan Brakel <i>Take the lead in the carbon accountability and sustainability</i> Catholic University Louvain, Engineering Faculty, Belgium
10:15 - 10:45	Coffee / Tea Break
10:45 - 12:15	Fr. Richie Gomez, MSC <i>Sustainable living and agriculture for indigenous peoples</i> Ecological Education Center in Butuan, Mindanao, the Philippines
13:00 - 15:00	Lunch / Free time — Personal reflection



15:00 - 16:00	Discussion in small groups
16:00 - 16:30	<i>Coffee / Tea Break</i>
16:30 - 17:30	<b>Panel Discussion II</b> <i>How do we as a Congregation work on our “ecological footprint”?</i>
18:15 - 19:15	<b>Eucharistic Celebration</b> (all together)
19:30 - 20:30	<i>Supper / Free time</i>
20:30 - 21:15	Special Talk: <b>Sr. Sheila Kinsey, FCJM</b> <b><i>Sowing Seeds for the Future</i></b> JPIC desk of USG/UISG, Rome, Italy
<b>TIME</b>	<b>THURSDAY, 7/5/2020 Spirituality aspect</b>
07:30 - 08:30	<i>Breakfast / Free time</i>
08:30 - 08:45	Prayer in English / Orientation – Moderators:
08:45 - 10:15	<b>Fr. Brian Grogan, SJ</b>  <b><i>What hope for a Small Blue Planet?</i></b>  Loving Sister Earth Movement, Ireland
10:15 - 10:45	<i>Coffee / Tea Break</i>
10:45 - 12:15	<b>Fr. Amado L. Picardal, CSsR</b>  <b><i>Deep Relationality: Living in Communion</i></b>  JPIC desk of USG/UISG, Rome, Italy
13:00 - 15:00	<i>Lunch / Free time – Personal Reflection</i>
15:00 - 16:00	<b>Discussion – Small Groups</b>
16:00 - 16:30	<i>Coffee / Tea Break</i>
16:30 - 17:30	<b>Panel Discussion III</b>  <b><i>Challenges and Opportunities of Living Green Mission</i></b>
18:15 - 19:15	<b>Eucharistic Celebration</b> (Language: English, Spanish, French, Italian)
19:30 - 20:30	<i>Festive Supper / Free time</i>
20:30 - 22:00	<b>Happy Coming Together</b>
<b>TIME</b>	<b>FRIDAY, 8/5/2020 (Closing Session)</b>
07:30 - 08:30	<i>Breakfast / Free time</i>
08:30 - 08:45	Prayer in French / Orientation – Moderators:
08:45 - 10:00	<b>PLENARY: Sharing and Evaluation</b>
10:00 - 10:30	<i>Coffee / Tea Break</i>
10:30 - 11:15	<b>CLOSING SPEECH: Fr. Augusto Zampini Davies</b>  <b><i>In the aftermath of the Synod on Panamazonia</i></b>  Dicastery of Integral Human Development
11.15 - 11.30	<b>CLOSING ADDRESS:</b> Fr. Tesfaye T. Gebresilasie, MCCJ, SEDOS President
11:45 - 12:45	<b>Eucharist Celebration and Sending Ceremony</b>
13:00 - 14:30	<i>Lunch</i> <b>Departure</b> <b>( Bus departure 2.30 p.m )</b>





## **A Corona Virus Prayer**

*Jesus Christ,  
you traveled through towns and villages “curing every disease and illness.”  
At your command, the sick were made well.  
Come to our aid now, in the midst of the global spread of the coronavirus,  
that we may experience your healing love.  
Heal those who are sick with the virus.  
May they regain their strength and health through quality medical care.  
Heal us from our fear,  
which prevents nations from working together and neighbors from helping one another.  
Heal us from our pride,  
which can make us claim invulnerability to a disease that knows no borders.*

*Jesus Christ, healer of all,  
stay by our side in this time of uncertainty and sorrow.  
Be with those who have died from the virus.  
May they be at rest with you in your eternal peace.  
Be with the families of those who are sick or have died.  
As they worry and grieve, defend them from illness and despair.  
May they know your peace.  
Be with the doctors, nurses, researchers and all medical professionals who seek to heal  
and help those affected and who put themselves at risk in the process.  
May they know your protection and peace.  
Be with the leaders of all nations.  
Give them the foresight to act with charity and true concern  
for the well-being of the people they are meant to serve.  
Give them the wisdom to invest in long-term solutions  
that will help prepare for or prevent future outbreaks.  
May they know your peace, as they work together to achieve it on earth.*

*Whether we are home or abroad,  
surrounded by many people suffering from this illness or only a few,  
Jesus Christ, stay with us as we endure and mourn, persist and prepare.  
In place of our anxiety, give us your peace.  
Jesus Christ, heal us. AMEN.*

*(by Kerry Weber)*