

# Bulletin 2025

vol. 57, no. 4/6 - April-June

SEDOS



## Missio Dei

Editorial	
Six Decades of <i>Missio Dei</i> : A Continuing Evolution	1
<hr/>	
<i>Missio Dei</i> as drawing Hope through Education and Mercy <i>Jorge Carlos Naranjo Alcaide, MCCJ</i>	3
<hr/>	
<i>Missio Dei</i> as Dialogue: Inspired by Religions <i>Joe Antonydoss, SVD</i>	7
<hr/>	
Care for the sick as a “ <i>Missio Dei</i> ” <i>René Stockman, FC</i>	17
<hr/>	
150 YEARS: The Growth of SVD Mission and the Future <i>Stanislaus Lazar, SVD</i>	26
<hr/>	
<i>Missio Dei</i> in Today's World:	37
<hr/>	
Application of Ecological Theological Reflection Based on the Biblical Passage Col 1:15 - 20 <i>Joseph Vo Dinh Nhat</i>	40
<hr/>	
Honoring Pope Francis, Welcoming Pope Leo XIV <i>James H. Kroeger, M.M.</i>	51
<hr/>	
SEDOS Residential Seminar – Program	54

**Sedos** - Via dei Verbiti, 1 - 00154 Roma  
TEL.: (+39)065741350  
E-mail address: [execdire@sedosmission.org](mailto:execdire@sedosmission.org)  
Homepage: <https://www.sedosmission.org>

SEDOS - Servizio di Documentazione e Studi sulla Missione Globale  
SEDOS - Service of Documentation and Studies on Global Mission  
SEDOS - Centre de Documentation et de Recherche sur la Mission Globale  
SEDOS - Centro de Documentación e Investigación sobre la Misión Global

## ***SEDOS***

*(Service of Documentation and Study on Global Mission)  
is a forum open to Roman-Catholic Institutes of Consecrated Life,  
which commit themselves to deepening their understanding of Global Mission.  
It encourages research and disseminates information  
through its Bulletin, Website, Seminars and Workshops.*

### **Members of the SEDOS Executive Committee 2025**

Mary Barron, OLA (President)  
Alain Mayama, CSSp (Vice President)  
John Paul Herman, SVD (Director)  
Maria Jerly, SSpS (Bursar)  
Anna Damas, SSpS  
Oyidu Okwori, SHCJ  
René Stockman, FC  
Márcio Flávio Martins, CICM  
Edgardo A. Guzmán, CMF  
Nirmala Gnanapragasam, FMM

### **SEDOS BULLETIN 2025**

**Editor:** Fr. John Paul Herman, SVD  
**Secretariat:** Sr. Celine Kokkat, JMJ  
**Translations:** Ms. Philippa Wooldridge  
**Printing:** Tipografia DON BOSCO

#### **Editorial Committee**

René Stockman, FC

*Based on the SEDOS Survey, the SEDOS Bulletin will be published quarterly, starting from 2025, and is free of charge for SEDOS Members.*

*The yearly Subscription is: €20 in Europe, and €30 Outside Europe.*

*For further information, advice, or change in subscription,  
please write to: [redacsed@sedosmission.org](mailto:redacsed@sedosmission.org)*

The digital version of the articles, and English translation of most of the articles can be found on the SEDOS website: [www.sedosmission.org](http://www.sedosmission.org).

The digital version can be received by email for free on a regular basis.

Do let us know if you are interested.

## Editorial

### Six Decades of *Missio Dei* - A Continuing Evolution



**Dear Members and Readers,**

Sixty years after Vatican II's *Ad Gentes*, the understanding of "mission" has evolved significantly.

Previously viewed as the Church's work to spread the Gospel, it is

now seen as *Missio Dei* (God's mission), with the Church participating in God's ongoing work of creation, salvation, and reconciliation.

This shift broadened mission to include justice, peace, and care for creation, recognizing God's presence in all cultures. Key implications include: God's initiative, requiring the Church's humility; mission's Trinitarian roots in God's love; encouragement of inter-cultural dialogue; and the affirmation of all Church members' role in mission.

Despite challenges and resistance to moving from a Church-centric view, ongoing theological discussions seek to balance God's universal salvific will with Gospel proclamation.

Fr. Alcaide's article, "*Missio Dei* as drawing hope through education and mercy," examines *Missio Dei*'s difficult situation in the ongoing war in Sudan which has had a negative impact on education and healthcare. It shows how the Comboni College of Science and Technology (CCST), guided by the understanding that mission is God's work, has adapted to the crisis. Since their campus was destroyed, CCST moved to online learning, relocated, prioritized healthcare by opening a hospice for palliative care, and worked with people of different faiths to provide care. Their focus before the war on a well-balanced mission that included education

and talking with people of other religions, allowed them to respond effectively to the crisis. The article argues that CCST's work implements *Missio Dei* by focusing on God's initiative, serving those most in need, and bringing about positive change. Their actions have earned them greater respect in the community and offered hope during the conflict.

In his article, "*Missio Dei* as Dialogue: Inspired by Religions," Fr. Joe Antonydoss argues that *Missio Dei* naturally involves dialogue, because God himself, as Trinity, is self-revealing and sends people out. Therefore, mission requires listening and dialogue to understand God's presence in different cultures and religions, as we join in that work with respect. The Vatican II documents like *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes* stress this openness. God communicates through love in Christ and the Spirit, making dialogue a normal part of mission, which involves both listening to others while sharing our own faith. Biblical agreements and Jesus' interaction support this idea. God's universal plan invites all of humanity to dialogue and togetherness, impelled by love to build peace and justice. Thus, *Missio Dei* requires respectful, open dialogue with other religions, and commitment to peace and justice.

Bro. Stockman's article, "Care for The Sick as A *Missio Dei*," reflects on caring for the sick as an expression of *Missio Dei*, seeing it as following the example of Jesus Christ, the ultimate healer. He emphasizes healing the whole person's needs – physical, emotional, and spiritual – just as Jesus did. While acknowledging that human care has its limits, the article highlights the importance of accompanying the sick, showing mercy, and balancing action with prayer, following Jesus' model. Reaching out to those who are marginalized and addressing the influence of evil are also important. Drawing on the writings

of St. Augustine, Jesus is presented as both the doctor and the medicine. The article calls for humility, realistic expectations in caregiving, and open communication. Ultimately, caring for the sick with compassion and prayer is a real way of showing *Missio Dei*, reflecting God's love and the healing presence of Christ.

Fr. Lazar's article, "150 YEARS – The Growth of SVD Mission and the Future," reflects on the 150-year development of the Society of the Divine Word's (SVD) mission within the framework of *Missio Dei*. It emphasizes that the SVD's journey is based on God's grace, with the Society acting as a tool in His mission. Key aspects include sharing the Gospel, adapting to local cultures, and promoting the full development of people. The SVD is focusing increasingly on dialogue and understanding different cultures to find God's presence within them. The article calls for speaking out against injustice, showing deep compassion like Jesus, and finding creative ways to follow Jesus in response to today's global challenges. The SVD's history shows a continuous effort to participate in *Missio Dei* through its capacity to adapt, to dialogue, offer advocacy, and compassion, encouraging new ideas and cultural transformation as the way forward.

The Statement from the recent SVD International Conference on *Missio Dei* in Rome, entitled "*Missio Dei* in Today's World," reaffirmed that God is actively present and that the Church's role is to reflect God's love and mercy. It highlighted a mission that involves many aspects: healing the wounds of the vulnerable and of creation, humbly engaging with the modern world by embracing diversity and acknowledging past wrongdoing, learning from cultures through respectful dialogue, and being inspired by the "rays of light" in other religions through open interaction. This means a renewed commitment to mission, to ongoing education, standing in solidarity with others and offering healing. In addition to deeply understanding and living the Gospel in intercultural communities, prioritizing adaptation to cultures, and embracing cooperation. The Conference concluded with a commitment to discovering and following God's mission today through encounter, listening, thoughtful reflection, and speaking out

prophetically, striving to be faithful, creative followers of Jesus in mission.

Joseph Nhat's article, "Application of Ecological Theological Reflection Based on the Biblical Passage in Colossians 1:15-20," argues that caring for the environment is central to *Missio Dei*, drawing from the passage in Colossians 1:15-20 about Christ's eminent role in creation. Christ as creator and the one who holds all things together includes all of creation, making the restoration of the environment a key part of mission. The idea of "deep incarnation" highlights how connected we are to all life, demanding a comprehensive approach. Christ's victory over evil includes overcoming the destruction of the environment. The article calls for an "ecological conversion" rooted in Christ, a way of understanding reconciliation that includes nature, and education about the environment to train "environmental peacemakers." It advocates for an "ecological spirituality of accompaniment" with a vision of a renewed creation in the future. Mission must engage with ecological systems, creating "ecological spaces of encounter" for spiritual reconnection and working together on environmental issues, emphasizing that caring for ecology is a core part of the Church's mission.

The 60 years since Vatican II's *Ad Gentes* have seen a profound shift to *Missio Dei*, a God-centered view that has broadened mission, emphasized divine initiative and the Trinity, encouraged intercultural dialogue, and affirmed the role of all Church members. Despite challenges, this has enriched the Church's approach, fostering a more complete, conversational, and globally aware mission. The current edition highlights various critical situations and the need for openness to the Spirit in implementing God's mission, featuring an article on "Honoring Pope Francis, Welcoming Pope Leo XIV" by Fr. James H. Kroeger, M.M., to offer valuable insights.

John Paul Herman, SVD

Director of SEDOS



## ***Missio Dei* as drawing Hope through Education and Mercy**

On 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023 the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and some civilian platforms were expected to sign an agreement to guide the transition of Sudan towards a democratic civilian government and the integration of both armies into a unified national one. Unfortunately, that event never arrived and the war between SAF and RSF broke out on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2023.

The missionary activity of the church in the country changed completely. The Archbishop of Khartoum and dozens of missionaries became displaced or refugee along with millions of Sudanese people.

### ***1. The War break out***

While other conflicts in the country had taken place in the peripheries, this one exploded in the capital, Khartoum, where most universities were located. The conflict expanded and affected 135 out of the 157 Sudanese universities. These government and private colleges and universities hosted around 87% of the students of the country<sup>1</sup>. Some of them left their home as the RSF soldiers entered their houses, pointed them with a *Kalashnikov* and obliged them to move with the minimum necessary and an uncertain future.

More than 11 million persons had to leave their homes as a consequence of this conflict and resettle in other cities of the country or abroad as refugees<sup>2</sup>. In this latter case, students who wished to continue their university journey could not do it, as the hosting universities require transcript details certificates authenticated by the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

of Sudan. All these procedures were impossible in a war country. Thousands of these university students had reached Egypt or South Sudan where it was almost impossible to find a job. Thus, which kind of future could expect this young people who had started a university career and could not continue it neither were able to find a job? The landscape was not much favourable for those who had remained in Sudan, scattered throughout villages or towns where economic activities were in standby or occupied by the original inhabitants.

Another segment of population particularly affected by the war were persons with chronic and terminal diseases. Most of the local companies of medicines were established in the city of Wad Medani that was invaded by the RSF on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2023. This invasion blocked the local production of medicines. Moreover, the arrival of thousands of wounded and displaced persons in the areas under SAF control led to the collapse of the few working health facilities that had to give priority for injured persons.

### ***2. Comboni College of Science and Technology and Missio Dei***

The Comboni Missionaries established an educational institution in Khartoum in 1929, Comboni College Khartoum (CCK), which in 2001 developed a higher education section, the Comboni College of Science and Technology (CCST), in collaboration with the local church and some Muslim Sudanese citizens. This institution had 768 students before the war. 58% of them were Sudanese, 27% were South Sudanese and 15% were Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees.

The university college expressed its missionary identity in different ways that aimed to bring “the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity

---

<sup>1</sup> Naranjo Alcaide, J.C. (2025). A University College Working in the Midst of the War in Sudan through Digital Education. *Social Education Research*, 6(2), 180–198. <https://doi.org/10.37256/ser.6220256254>

<sup>2</sup> IOM, *Sudan Mobility Overview*. September-October 2024. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/sudan-mobility-overview-3#:~:text=Sudan> hosted an estimated 11%2C188%2C057,countries since 15 April 2023.

from within and making it new”<sup>3</sup>. This need of transforming society was completely necessary to heal the tribal and interreligious tensions that were among the main factors behind the different civil wars that had torn the country since 1955.

Thus, evangelizing a society divided by conflicts meant to make of CCST a space where every student and staff member, regardless of the religious or tribal affiliation, experiences the beauty of diversity as a gift created by God and of the service to the weakest as a force to transform the community and experience the encounter with the Crucified One.

To shape such a space, the College had prayer rooms for Muslims and Christians, started every event with prayers by believers of both religions, celebrated Christian and Islamic feasts, offered lecturers of Christian and Islamic religion for the students to choose and made special efforts to find financial support for the academic fees of students coming from marginalized areas of the country such as Darfur or Nuba Mountains.

The education to service was channelled through the volunteer’s group in palliative care, coordinated by the Nursing department but open to students of all the academic programs. Muslim and Christian students and staff members were supporting persons with terminal and chronic diseases in the Oncological Center of Khartoum, not far from the College, or in the center for persons with TB managed by the Missionaries of Charity. The eyes of the students were shining every time they came from serving persons in such situations.

In *Gaudium et Spes* (no.22) the II Vatican Council mentions an action of the “Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God” through which every person of good will is “associated with the paschal mystery”. This action would explain how Muslim students and staff members could also be associated to the Paschal mystery whenever they experience the pain of the person with terminal and chronic disease as a call to go out from themselves and support him/her.

This missionary understanding of the action of the College would be in tune with the concept of *Missio Dei* that represents a “missiological attempt to articulate a theocentric concept of mission with reference to the missionary nature and act of the triune God”. Surely, the missionary praxis in a Muslim majority country like Sudan looks more coherent with the concept of *Missio Dei* than with a narrow ecclesio-centric understanding of mission “which was predominant within the Western global missionary movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries”<sup>4</sup>.

In this perspective, the triune God is both the sender and the sent in mission<sup>5</sup> and should be the sole source and content of any missionary activities<sup>6</sup>. This also leads to overcome a limited understanding of mission reduced to proselytization and to think of “a creative enterprise of word and deed in the formation and the transformation of individual lives and of cultural and social patterns”<sup>7</sup>.

Nadia Abdalla Idris, a Muslim student, explained with simple words what she experienced in the school and what could be interpreted as individual and social transformation:

*Comboni schools have fought, and I hope they will always continue to fight, the great enemy that is ignorance, because it is blind ignorance that is behind the pain that we cause to each other. The more we learn, the more aware we become of the variety of possibilities and options that can open up to us. Comboni schools, by increasing the number of educated men and women, definitely contribute to*

<sup>4</sup> Baik, Chung-Hyun and Sinwoong Kim (2024). ‘Missio Dei’, St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology. Edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al.

<https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/MissioDei>

<sup>5</sup> Engelsen, Tormod (2003). ‘Missio Dei: The Understanding and Misunderstanding of a Theological Concept in European Churches and Missiology’, *International Review of Mission*, 92 (367), p. 483.

<sup>6</sup> Andersen, Wilhelm (1955). *Towards a Theology of Mission: A Study of the Encounter Between the Missionary Enterprise and the Church and Its Theology*. London: SCM Press, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Lehmann, Paul L. (1952). ‘The Missionary Obligation of the Church’, *Theology Today*, 9 (1), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 18.

*creating a climate of mutual understanding and tolerance. In our respective tribes and different cultures, we must strive to find strength and enrichment, not the reason for war and destruction. Comboni schools contribute to peace in Sudan by teaching young people that it is okay to be different, it is okay to be yourself and to be an educated person.*

Nonetheless, the war broke out again on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2023 and the new context challenged the missionary identity of the College in a different way.

### **3. Education and health on the move**

Two months after the war began, Comboni College of Science and Technology (CCST), distributed among the students an online questionnaire prepared with *Google Forms* application to ask whether they wanted to continue their studies or prefer to wait for better times. The headquarters of this university was in the center of the capital, just 800 meters from the presidential palace and therefore became the scene of fighting from the first day of the war. Since then, students and staff of the university have never been able to return to their headquarters. Among the 768 students registered before the war, 256 responded to the questionnaire administered between June 17 and August 12, 2023. In summary, 176 expressed their desire to continue studying despite the situation in the country (68.7%) while 78 students (30.5%) responded negatively to the question: "If the College starts the second semester on August 7, 2023, would you be available to follow the lessons through an online learning management system?" The questionnaire also assessed the feasibility of the operation concerning the access to the internet of the students, the financial implications and the availability of teaching staff.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> October 2023 the Minister of Higher Education authorized universities to shift their programs into online or to relocate them in safe places of the country or even abroad. Some Sudanese universities opened centres in Egypt or other countries. Comboni College of Science and Technology decided to open new offices in the city of Port Sudan, located in the Northeast of the country and controlled by the SAF. There, the Comboni Missionaries run a

Secondary School that had some rooms abandoned. The College opened an office to manage the Learning Management System and re-organize activities.

Most of the members of the nursing department had taken refuge 200 km south of Khartoum, in the city of Wad Medani, along with some students and lecturers. With the funding of a project the College planned to establish also some offices there to provide them access to the internet and to combine the online activities with the organization of clinical practice for the students of the Bachelor Degree in Nursing Sciences.

On 15<sup>th</sup> December 2023 the RSF invaded Wad Medani which obliged students and staff to leave their refuge and set on the move again. This time the nursing team headed Port Sudan, where they reached at the beginning of January 2024 after completing the 1,100 km that separate both locations.

After sharing our plans with the State Ministry of Health, the team organized the clinical practice of the nursing students and registered the first nursing clinic of the country. This clinic is a very unique one as it is a Palliative Care Hospice completely managed by nurses.

The Principal and the Program Coordinator of the BSc in Nursing Sciences met the Director of the Oncological Center of Port Sudan to coordinate the palliative care service of the clinic with the one of the Center. When we introduced our program to the Director, Dr. Itidal Ibrahim, a Muslim Sudanese oncologist, she confessed that after having joined the first batch of the course of introduction to Palliative Care for health professionals organized by the College in Khartoum in 2016<sup>8</sup>, she had prayed "Almighty God" to have the possibility of applying the learnt contents in her home town, Port Sudan. For her, our arrival as a consequence of the war was God's answer to her prayers

---

<sup>8</sup> Damanhuri, G., & Marhoom, M. (2021). Republic of Sudan-Palliative Care-Hope for the future. In M. Silbermann (ed.), *Palliative Care for Chronic Cancer Patients in the Community*. Springer, pp. 231-239.



In the clinic, the nursing department works with a network of volunteers. Two hundred volunteers have been trained in 2024 in different locations of the outskirts of Port Sudan. They are Muslims and Christians moved by a common driver. Muslims start their prayer in the name of God the most merciful. Jesus revealed the merciful face of God. And mercy is the driver that moves these volunteers to go outside themselves in order to support families who accompany persons with terminal and chronic diseases.

The first group of 30 students of the Bachelor Degree in Nursing Sciences arrived to Port Sudan in May 2024. Some of them had to cross through areas under the control of the RSF to arrive to this SAF controlled region after dozens of military checkpoints. Two students who were in Zalingei (West Darfur), fled away 1,058 km southwards until Aweil in South Sudan, then travelled eastwards 787 km until Juba and from there took the plane to Port Sudan. They were ready to fight for their own future.

#### 4. Restoring hope and transforming the community

After the first group of nursing students, a second one arrived. This time they were 74. And their number continues growing. In June they will be 87 and the College will be allowed to register new comers, the first group since the beginning of the war. Until then it has worked with ongoing students registered before the war. Some of them explicitly said that they had lost hope after the war started. When they saw the first group of nursing students resuming studies they believed that it was possible to continue in the middle of the conflict and build a different future for their lives.

The action of the clinic and the volunteers in the community has also claimed the attention of some local NGOs who started supporting their service with donations of medicines and food. In a similar way, the nursing department has been invited to introduce the concept of palliative care to the 42 leaders of the popular committees of Red Sea State.



**Photo from SVD International Conference on Mission at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome**

In Port Sudan the nursing students had their clinical practice in the nursing skills lab the College equipped inside Comboni Secondary School and in several health centers. But they also supported the group of volunteers. In this way, the College integrated its academic activities with community service and transformation of this community through the attention to the weakest.

For the local population the word “Comboni” means education and refers to a church institution that has educated thousands of persons in the country since the XIX century<sup>9</sup>. The ongoing conflict has increased the esteem of the people. While international schools and national universities moved abroad, Comboni Schools and Comboni College of Science and Technology remained among the people of the country in a very challenging moment to share a mission of mercy

and hope. This mission has its source in the Triune God, goes beyond the limits of the Church and is carried out by the Catholic Church, not alone, but with Muslim persons. In this way, it touches and transforms the lives of concrete persons and communities of Islamic majority.

<sup>9</sup> Naranjo Alcaide, J. C. (2019). The Development of Catholic Schools in the Republic of Sudan. *Social and Education History*, 8(1), 83–111.

<https://doi.org/10.17583/hse.2019.3611>



## **MISSIO DEI AS DIALOGUE - INSPIRED BY RELIGIONS**



### **INTRODUCTION**

*Missio Dei*, first and foremost, refers to God and His Mission. Georg Vicedom in his book *The Mission of God* rightly says, “the mission is work that ultimately belongs to God and this

becomes the implication of *missio Dei*. He is the One who gives orders, the Owner, the One who takes care of things.”<sup>1</sup> God is an active subject of the mission that he carries out His Mission faithfully, and the Church becomes an instrument of His own Mission. David Bosch in his famous book *Transforming Mission* says that Mission is not primarily an activity of the Church, but an attribute of God, because our God is a missionary God, who places Mission close to His heart.<sup>2</sup> This missionary God, who sent His only Son, and together with His Son, He sent the Holy Spirit into the world, in order to extend His personal invitation to all people to participate in His Mission.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, this act of God’s sending of His Son and Spirit reveals God’s own «sending» nature.<sup>4</sup> Thus, «revealing Himself» and «sending» nature of God express God’s self-communication to all people of God. From this point of view, Stephen Bevans rightly puts *mission Dei* as,

*The trinitarian emphasis of the missio Dei approach points to the importance of mission as*

*involving listening and dialogue. Since mission is first of all God’s work, the first step of mission for Christians and the Church is to discern where God is actually at work: in historical movements and events, in peoples and cultures, in other religions – and then join God in that work. God is present and working in the world before the missionary arrives on the scene, and so she or he needs to approach another people, another culture, and another religion with deep respect.*<sup>5</sup>

### **1. TRINITARIAN FOUNDATIONS FOR DIALOGUE**

One can say that the Mission of God primarily has its foundation in Triune God Himself, and God expands this Trinitarian dimension of communication or conversation, to indicate the importance of His Mission. This approach of intersecting God’s Mission should be a slow steady process, because it involves the deep sentiments and emotions of peoples, cultures, and their religions. The focus of the Trinitarian basis of dialogue is a relationship. Christian Spirituality finds its basis in Trinitarian relationship, and in particular way of being united with God, mediated by Jesus Christ through his ministry, death, and resurrection, and made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

Ambrogio Bongiovanni expresses his view on Trinitarian communion of love as God’s gift, which springs from His love to whole humanity. The Father and the Son communicate in the love of the Holy Spirit, who unites the persons of the Trinity and becomes the source of love for all peoples. Thus, this expression of His love becomes a relationship, which reinforce each

<sup>1</sup> Cf. G. F. VICEDOM, *The Mission of God. An Introduction to a Theology of Mission*, St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1965, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. D. BOSCH, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll (NY): Orbis Books, 2011, pp. 381-382.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. J. G. FLETT, *The Witness of God. The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community*, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J. G. FLETT, *The Witness of God*. p. 198.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. S. BEVANS SVD, “Theologies of Mission”, in: K. KIM, K. JORGENSEN, and A. FITCHETT-CLIMENHAGA (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, p. 112. (111-128)

<sup>6</sup> Cf. P. C. PHAN, “Asian Christian Spirituality”, in: F. WILFRED (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 511.

other.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, there is a true sharing and interchange among the three persons: Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. According to Pietro Rossano, this vertical Trinitarian communication produces horizontal interpersonal communication in which the great novelty of history represents the Christian faith.<sup>8</sup> From this one can understand that human beings develop a relationship with each other to experience harmony and peace among themselves. Thus, this personal relationship among human beings produces the fruits of communication of the interpersonal relationship, which is “intra-trinitarian” of God, who is in constant love with humans.<sup>9</sup> This openness leads to knowing the wellbeing of one’s own community and to extending this companionship of love to know the wellbeing of the other communities, cultures, and religions.

Thus, the key themes of understanding Trinitarian relationships are creation, incarnation, and glorification. The experiences with the creation and incarnation lead one to understand and look forward to glorification, which is the experience of communication and communion.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, dialogue involves relationship, which is a necessary dimension for more communion with other faith traditions. This dialogue of relationship moves oneself from one’s own faith tradition to understand the other persons and their faith traditions, by having a mutual enrichment and getting into other shoes.<sup>11</sup> Stephen Bevans puts it more concretely that mission is dialogue, and it points out to a basic attitude that every Christian

should engage himself/herself to understand dialogue as relationship, friendship, and receiving and offering hospitality.<sup>12</sup>

Further, Philip Scheldrake says in this regard, the out-working of the co-operative relationship between the persons of the Holy Trinity: Creator, co-creating Word, and life-giving Holy Spirit share a dynamic spiritual economy of love. Therefore, the high weightage is to live as persons in community having an intrinsic relationality with one another.<sup>13</sup> The spirituality of dialogue, therefore, involves the personal relationship with God and one another, the discipline of appropriate prayer, penance, and service to God and neighbour.<sup>14</sup> Roger Schroeder strongly puts his attempts of understanding the Trinitarian love, the overflowing fountain-like love, that is even working outside the boundaries of the Church, which he means to say, God’s spirit of blessing continues to spread out to all peoples, through their particular culture, experiences, and journeys in faith, which is, often in ways, only known to God.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, he says that the metaphorical way of understanding God’s presence in the peoples of multiple cultures and religions, one can analyze the example of taking prism in the hand, it radiates in different colours, so does the Spirit of God through the experiences of people of multicoloured cultures and religions.<sup>16</sup> Here, one should ask questions like, what is spirituality? What make human to search God and initiate dialogue with other religions through spirituality of one’s own tradition? According to Edmund Kee-Fook Chia, “Spirituality refers to the way or path a person takes to cultivate this trust or to engage in the search. It is efforts exerted for the purpose of

<sup>7</sup> Cf. A. BONGIOVANNI, *Il Dialogo Interreligioso. Orientamenti per la Formazione*, Bologna: Editrice Missionaria Italiana, 2008, p. 125.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. A. BONGIOVANNI, *Il Dialogo Interreligioso. Orientamenti per la Formazione*, p. 127, see also, P. ROSSANO, *Dialogo e Annuncio Cristiano. L'incontro con le grandi Religioni*, Ciniselo Balsamo (Milano): Edizioni Paoline, 1993, p. 185.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. A. BONGIOVANNI, *Il Dialogo Interreligioso. Orientamenti per la Formazione*, p. 127.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. P. B. KLEDEN SVD, “Trinitarian Spirituality and Interculturality”, in: L. T. STANISLAUS SVD, M. UEFFING SVD (ed.), *Intercultural Living*, Vol. 1, Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (ISPCK) and Germany (Sankt Augustin): Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, 2015, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. H. FERNANDES, *Francis Xavier and The Spirituality of Dialogue*, Pilar (Goa): Xavierian Publications Society, 2012, p. 188-189.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. S. BEVANS SVD, “Theologies of Mission”, pp. 116-117.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. P. SHELDRAKE (ed.), *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, p. 536.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. P. SHELDRAKE (ed.), *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, p. 536.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. R. SCHROEDER SVD, “Enriched by the Spirituality of the ‘Other’”, in: L. T. STANISLAUS and C. TAUCHNER (eds.), *Becoming Intercultural. Perspectives on Mission*, Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (ISPCK) and Germany (Sankt Augustin): Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, 2021, p. 76.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. R. SCHROEDER SVD, “Enriched by the Spirituality of the ‘Other’”, p. 76.

discovering meaning, purpose, and significance within oneself (inward search), in relation to others (outward search), and in relation to that which transcends humankind (upward search).<sup>17</sup> Therefore the constant search of a human person's spirituality calls to dialogue with God, oneself, and with one another honestly to bring unity in diversity, even though we are the people of multicoloured cultures and religions.

## 2. THE IMPORTANCE OF DIALOGUE SINCE VATICAN II DOCUMENTS

Since Vatican II, there are numerous documents, which express the openness in the attitude and sensibility to other religions and cultures. Now, we see, only the deep aspects of dialogue and its tremendous significance in *some documents*, like, *Ecclesiam Suam* (6<sup>th</sup> August 1964), *Nostra Aetate* (28<sup>th</sup> October 1965), *Ad Gentes* (7<sup>th</sup> December 1965), *Gaudium et Spes* (7<sup>th</sup> December 1965), *Redemptoris Missio* (7<sup>th</sup> December 1990), *Evangelii Gaudium* (24<sup>th</sup> November 2013), and *Fratelli Tutti* (3<sup>rd</sup> October 2020).

In short, we see, how these documents stated above are connected to the importance of dialogue. *Ecclesiam Suam* (6<sup>th</sup> August 1964) connects the aspect of dialogue more implicitly. Pope Paul VI introduces the term 'dialogue of salvation' (*ES* 70) to all humanity. He continues, that the religion in its very nature, is a deep and true relationship of God and man. It expresses the deep love of God on human through dialogue and this expression culminates in prayer, thus, prayer becomes dialogue. At the same time, God reveals Himself in His own unique essence and in His own way, as pure love and simple (cf. *ES* 70).<sup>18</sup> *Ecclesiam Suam* makes a dialogical turn in Catholic Church's relations with the rest of the world, more specially, with the call for dialogue with religions and cultures of all people of good will, promoting fellowship and harmony of life. To

notice the importance of the word dialogue, one can find in the document Paul VI uses seventy-seven times, to give more concrete and solid foundations to the aspect of dialogue of the Church with others.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, he sums up in four concentric circles of such dialogue on the part of the Church: dialogue with the world, dialogue with the members of other religions, dialogue with other Christians and families, and dialogue within the Church itself.<sup>20</sup>

This relationship of God the father extends His love to all humanity, in and through Christ and the Holy Spirit (cf. *ES* 71), and this love of God extends concretely to four circles, namely, world, other religions, our own Christian brothers and sisters, and within the Holy Catholic Church. Paul VI clearly puts his vision on dialogue in these four circles, where he concentrates on the first circle, the entire human race – the world, with full sharing of common nature, a common life, with all the gifts, and the problems (cf. *ES* 97). In spite of all the challenges and difficulties to dialogue the entire human race, Paul VI suggests, "We do not therefore give up hope of the eventual possibility of a dialogue between these men and the Church" (*ES* 105). Thus, through dialogue, we spread peace among all people of God (cf. *ES* 106). Second circle would emphasize more on worshiping the Supreme God, who is common for all the religions, even though the great Afro-Asiatic religions would not compromise with monotheistic religions, like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, one cannot avoid the existence of other faith traditions, which has common origin and destiny in God, who wishes may be to be known, loved and served in that way. This attitude does not in any way reduce our Christian religion, but it involves hope that will bring all people, who look for God and worship Him alone (cf. *ES* 107). Thus, it is clear, the Church wants to give more importance to spiritual and moral values of non-Christian religions, which promotes spheres of religious liberty, human brotherhood

<sup>17</sup> Cf. E. CHIA, "Spirituality, Mission, and Liturgy. A Sacramental Perspective", in: K. KIM, K. JORGENSEN, and A. FITCHETT-CLIMENHAGA (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, p. 206.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. PAUL VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, Encyclical Letter, 6 August 1964, in: AAS 56 (1964), pp. 609-659.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. T. WRIGHT, "The Dialogue of Spirituality from *Ecclesia Suam* to Pope Francis. A Tree that has to become a Forest", *Journal of Dharma* 43/4 (October-December 2018), p. 374.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. J. DUPUIS SJ, *Christianity and the Religions. From Confrontation to Dialogue*, Maryknoll (New York): Orbis Books, 2001, p. 218.

and sisterhood, education, culture, and social justice and welfare with a genuine mutual respect for one another (cf. *ES* 108).

Now coming to the third circle of our own Christian brothers and sisters, who were divided once upon a time, to look into the things which we have common than the division (cf. *ES* 109). The two important steps of Catholic Church are to have full communion with our Christian Churches and promote Christian unity, which has the deep message of Christ's prayer in John's Gospel, «that they be one (Jn 17:21) ». The last circle is for us Catholics, where Paul VI desires, «that this dialogue with Our own children may be conducted with fullness of faith, with charity, and with dynamic holiness (*ES* 113) ». Finally, this dialogue should impart the virtue of listening, and this readiness to listen to the variety of views in today's world, calls us to make us strong (cf. *ES* 113). These four circles in *Ecclesiam Suam* should foster among all people of God.

Therefore, God initiates dialogue through His goodness, so that, one can expand this dialogue to others with deep respect and with sincere hearts. Furthermore, Jacques Dupuis in his work explains, this dialogue between God and humanity must continue for the greater cause and it must be the role of the Church to enter into dialogue with the entire world.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, in a nutshell, the spirit of this encyclical, in line with the importance of dialogue is to establish the relationship of the Church and the world in a profound way, and that becomes the true nature of dialogue, which involves the dynamics of actions and conducts a dialogue with dignity (cf. *ES* 76-78).<sup>22</sup> To put it more concretely, the *Ecclesiam Suam* invites all the people of God, both pastors and the faithful, to get engaged in dialogue genuinely to produce fruits in abundance. By doing this, one can experience the truth through love, which includes everyone to reach to the common destiny, who is God Himself. This beautiful attitude of coming together through genuine dialogue with one another calls each of us to work together for justice and peace without violence and deceit, in order to promote harmony in the world (*ES* 92).

Now to move on to the next important document, *Nostra Aetate*, one should know, for the first time, there was a positive approach in the history of the Church, which is, the declaration on the relationship of the Church to non-Christians, which deals more explicitly and examines more closely her firm relationship with the people of other faith traditions. The great task of the Church is to promote unity and love among all peoples of the earth, to understand the common origin and the common destiny, that is, in God.<sup>23</sup> From this declaration, we look into only the section of relationship with Hinduism. The declaration – *Nostra Aetate* clearly says that the people of Hindu religion contemplate on the divine mystery and express their deep search through philosophical enquiry. They seek God through a profound meditative life, ascetical practices, and flight to God with love and trust (cf. *NA* 2).<sup>24</sup> Thus, encountering other religions and showing deep mutual respect to sentiments of the other faith traditions, Catholic Church admits strongly, that a ray of that Truth, which enlightens all people for the ways of good conduct of life, and promoting spiritual values for life, Church does not reject, what is considered true and holy by these religions (cf. *NA* 2). However, the Church continues to proclaim that, Christ is the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 14:6), in whom fullness of life is experienced and God had reconciled all things to Himself.<sup>25</sup>

The next important decree on the mission activity of the Church, which is, *Ad Gentes*, calls the whole Church to promote a pastoral and missionary activity with a great zeal. The decree *Ad Gentes* which deals with the Church's missionary activity reflects on the Church's new understanding of her mystery, her openness to all that is good and her new attitude towards other religions. As the continuation of God's mission manifested in Jesus Christ through the Spirit, the Church is missionary by its very nature (cf. *AG* 2). The Catholic Church continues her mission of making present God's love and realize the divine reign, while discerning salvific presence in the plurality of

<sup>21</sup> Cf. J. DUPUIS SJ, *Verso una Teologia Cristiana del Pluralismo Religioso*, Brescia: Editrice Queriniana, 1997, p. 229.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. PAUL VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, pp. 609-659.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. PAUL VI, *Nostra Aetate*, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, n. 1, 28<sup>th</sup> October 1965, in: AAS 58 (1966), pp. 740-744.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. PAUL VI, *Nostra Aetate*, n. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. PAUL VI, *Nostra Aetate*, n. 2.



religions and cultures. Consequently, proclamation of the Good News in a pluralistic context demands an integrated process of inter-religious dialogue, inculturation, and work for justice, both for humans and the whole earth. Before having the dialogue with other religions, one should be deeply rooted in one's own faith, so that the true spirit of dialogue takes place. The right methodical exercise and scientific preparation for this task is expected to dialogue with non-Christian religions and cultures (cf. AG 34). In today's context of having dialogue with other religions is most emphasized in some of the countries in Asia, more specially, in India. People from different religions come together for various purposes in day-to-day life. They meet in the working places, schools, colleges, and marketplaces. Therefore, sharing, conversing, and dialoguing among themselves in various possible ways in their lives are much seen and lived.

The pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world, *Gaudium et Spes*, which highlights the necessity of dialogue among religions with human dignity. The important role of the Holy Spirit and Spirit's presence in the world, which is in and through Jesus Christ, are implicitly expressed in this document. Moreover, it is the Spirit, which moves the world in order to promote harmony and peace among all the religions. Thus, Christ, who is first born, through the Spirit, dwells in all the people of God. Therefore, Christ wishes to pour down His grace to all, because He died once and for all the people of God, who are having good will in whose hearts grace works enormously (cf. GS 22).<sup>26</sup>

Now, this presence of the Holy Spirit calls everyone in the world for its constitutive openness, mutual respect to other religions, and prayerful atmosphere. Thus, the presence and the activity of the Holy Spirit in other religions touches both the individual and the society, history, peoples, cultures, and religions. Therefore, now, the members of the other religions respond positively to the invitation of God through the presence of the Holy Spirit.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Cf. PAUL VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n. 22, 7 December 1965, in: AAS 58 (1966), pp. 1025-1115.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. M. DHAVAMONY SJ, *The Kingdom of God and World Religions*, Documenta Missionalia 31, Roma:

This document emphasizes the importance of human dignity, freedom, and rights. This human dignity transcends one's own religious set-up and makes the foundation for dialogue with other religious people or faith traditions. This action is done to promote peace and justice, together with all the people of God, because trusting and respecting one another will enrich the inner spirits and talents to foster the brotherhood and sisterhood (cf. GS 78).<sup>28</sup>

#### **REDEMPTORIS MISSIO: INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE – A NECESSITY**

The Mission of Christ is at the center of the missionary work of the Church according to Pope John Paul II in this document. In the following presentation, however, this document would address the dimension of interreligious dialogue, as an important task of the missionary work of the Church on the threshold of the third millennium. In this document, the main task of the Church's mission is, to direct man's gaze, to direct the conscience, and experience of all humanity towards the mystery of Christ.<sup>29</sup>

Interreligious dialogue is part of the evangelizing mission of the Church.<sup>30</sup> The important aspect of the path of dialogue is knowing oneself, one's faith, one's own spirituality, and one's openness to dialogue. In dialogue, the Church intends to discover the "seeds of the Word",<sup>31</sup> which are found in the people and religious traditions of humanity. Further the distinctive contribution of Pope John Paul II points out the necessity of a broader understanding of the theology of religions, emphasizing the operative aspect of the Spirit of God in religious life of non-Christians, and in their religious traditions.<sup>32</sup> Through this affirmation, Pope John Paul II continues to lay the theological foundations, which is the core aspect of the Church, for giving more significant importance to interreligious

Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2004, pp. 102-103.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. PAUL VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 78.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, Encyclical Letter, n. 4, 7 December 1990, in: AAS 83 (1991), pp. 249-340.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 55.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 56.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. J. DUPUIS SJ, *Verso una Teologia Cristiana del Pluralismo Religioso*, p. 233.

dialogue, with the true love, respect, and openness.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the place of Christ in relation to the faithful engagement in dialogue must be preserved. While dialogue with other religions, even if difficult and demanding, will help the Church and the missionaries, to see the work of God in others and other religious traditions, through the Spirit of God. From here, it is possible to know each other better and witness the fullness of God's revelation that the Church has received.

#### **EVANGELII GAUDIUM: AN ATTITUDE OF OPENNESS**

The very fact that Pope Francis started writing this document *Evangelii Gaudium*, he had enough and more pastoral approaches in his thoughts and actions. He insisted on dialogue between the religions more and more and to strengthen the pastoral field. He clearly expresses that this dialogue should have an openness in truth and in love. He continues to encourage us through his words that despite of various obstacles and difficulties, and experiencing great religious fundamentalist attitudes, one should work for the peace constantly, with the help of strong commitment. In this way, one learns to accept others and get involved to work for social justice, harmony, and peace to the society, where we all live together. He accentuates on the important aspect of dialogue as, "mutual listening", which enriches all.<sup>34</sup> Further, Pope Francis marked the necessity of dialogue, by giving the example of what Indian Bishops expressed about dialogue, that is, "being open to them, sharing their joys and sorrows."<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, in *Evangelium Gaudium* Francis states,

*Interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities. And in this dialogue, "ever friendly and sincere, attention must always be paid to the essential bond between dialogue and proclamation, which leads the Church to*

*maintain and intensify her relationship with non-Christians." This should spur religions to dialogue among themselves for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building networks of respect and fraternity.*<sup>36</sup>

#### **FRATELLI TUTTI: DIALOGUE AND FRIENDSHIP**

In this encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis deals exclusively in the sixth chapter, on «dialogue and friendship in society». He says, "approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these summed up in the one word "dialogue". If we want to encounter and help one another, we have to dialogue (FT 198)." Furthermore, he emphasizes more on genuine dialogue and true openness to others. He continues saying that in a true spirit of dialogue, one can definitely grow and experience others to grasp the significance of what they try to do to us and speak to us (cf. FT 203).<sup>37</sup> Through this genuine dialogue, actually, one builds the true friendship with other faith traditions. Mustafa Genc says, "Building social friendship between groups with a history of being different is not dependent on the absence of war, but allowing people to show self-expression, and to reciprocate the skills of listening, looking, knowing, understanding, and finding common ground that suits each other."<sup>38</sup> This attitude of openness to dialogue certainly builds up the Kingdom of God together for peaceful atmosphere in the society, and it helps everyone to work for justice, peace, and to integrate wholeness in all the creation. Moreover, Genc points out in his article about *Fratelli Tutti* as "the culture of encounter, which follows the path of truth and peace."<sup>39</sup> Further, he personalizes the word «encounter» as a slow and steady process of listening patiently and accepting others.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Cf. M. DE GIORGI, "Interreligious Dialogue in the Context of Mission", in: P. BAEKELMANS CICM, and M. H. ROBERT OLA (ed.), *New Trends in Mission. The Emerging Future*, SEDOS, Maryknoll (New York): Orbis Books, 2022, p. 223.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*. Encyclical Letter, 3rd October 2020, n. 203.

<sup>38</sup> M. Genc, "Fratelli Tutti: An Interpretation of Dialogue and Friendship in Society: An Islamic Perspective", *The Journal of Social Encounters* 5/1 (2021), pp. 33-36.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. J. DUPUIS SJ, *Verso una Teologia Cristiana del Pluralismo Religioso*, p. 484.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*. Apostolic Exhortation, n. 250, 24 November 2013, in: AAS 105 (2013), pp. 1019-1137.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 250.

### 3. GOD COMMUNICATES AND REVEALS

#### HIMSELF

God communicates and reveals Himself through His deep love to all the peoples of all the nations, in Christ and the active presence of the Holy Spirit, the Church becomes the sign of that love of God (cf. *DM* 9). God's communication to all His people is out of His love and own personal interest to all people, in order to save everyone and give eternal life to all. God, who is the beginning and the end, can be experienced by all people through the deep communion with Him, even at the present state of ourselves (*DV* 6). This deep communion involves dialogue between God and human. In this perspective, Church too opens herself for a genuine dialogue with other faith traditions. Therefore, the dynamics of Christians should lead to listen to others patiently, and strive to understand, what other faith traditions try to communicate to us in order to profit the gifts, which God bestows on all more generously (cf. *DM* 21). Dialogue is the norm and necessary dimensions of every form of Christian mission, as well as simple presence, witness, service, and direct proclamation in the community, where we all live together in the pluralistic circumstances.

Thus, dialogue is based on *Missio Dei*. Just God is dialogical in Godself and He engages in the world, so also, the Church must give her service to the world, and learn from the world, its cultures, and religions.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, in dialogue, Christians should share their faith experiences of Christ with the brothers and sisters of other faith traditions. On the other hand, Christians should be ready to listen to the faith experiences of other religious faith traditions more attentively to promote and build the Kingdom of God (cf. *DM* 40).<sup>42</sup> As we know, the focus in *Nostra Aetate* indicates clearly the love of God and paves the path of love of neighbor, which are intrinsically present in Christian spirituality. God is love and communion. As in the Gospel of John, we read, God is love (cf. Jn 4:16), who communicates to the human beings to

strengthen the human relationship, which is the foundation of dialogue.<sup>43</sup> In the present scenario, we are facing new challenges and opportunities, when we speak about religious pluralism, and this involves a new way of approaching our evangelization in the new circumstances of the people of other faiths. One of the essential needs for the proclamation of love of God among the people of different faith traditions is knowing the spirituality of interreligious dialogue,<sup>44</sup> because it helps to go deeper to understand the reality of the society, where the people of other faith traditions live together.

Stephen Bevans puts it in a nutshell, the understanding of dialogue is all about respecting the other person, being open towards the other person, and prompt willingness to learn from the other. Further, he continues his thoughts to go deeper, to respond to the Christians, by saying that Christians should engage in the mission, by making people of other religious tradition as their friends, exchange of true respect, and welcoming them as their own guests. From this action of doing dialogue, one can do the prophetic work of sharing the Gospel message.<sup>45</sup> Thus, he concludes, a good relationship should not stop in making only friends, and appreciating cultures and religions, but mission is about sharing the good news of the Kingdom of God.<sup>46</sup>

#### 4. DIALOGUE IN THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

To know the strong foundation for dialogue in the biblical perspective, one can cite a few strong points, where God involves Himself in the communication or dialoguing with humans. To take this standpoint, one can notice, in the Old Testament the dialogue of God makes His deep relationship through His covenant relationship. More profoundly, one can say, God's activity extends beyond the confines of the chosen people to all other peoples of the earth. To substantiate this claim, we see, the covenant relationship of God made with all

<sup>41</sup> Cf. R. SCHROEDER SVD, "Interculturality and Prophetic Dialogue", *Verbum SVD* 54 (2013), p. 14.

<sup>42</sup> SECRETARIATUS PRO NON CHRISTIANIS, *The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions. Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*, Città del Vaticano: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1984.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. A. BONGIOVANNI, *Spirituality of Interfaith Dialogue. A Call to Live Together*, pp. 134-135.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. H. FERNANDES, *Francis Xavier and The Spirituality of Dialogue*, p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. S. BEVANS SVD, "Theologies of Mission", p. 116.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. S. BEVANS SVD, "Theologies of Mission", p. 117.

peoples at the beginning of creation (Gen 1:1), the covenant with Noah (Gen 9), and the prophets who brought a universal perspective of salvation that extends beyond and through Israel to the nations (Is 52:10). Moreover, from the beginning, God made the covenant with all peoples (Gen 1-11) and indeed, people who were not Israelites are proposed by New Testament writers as models of faith (Heb 11:4-7).<sup>47</sup>

The Church has remained faithful to Jesus' mission mandate, namely, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15) and "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) are the clear signs to proclaim the Word of God to the ends of the earth. In Acts, St. Paul, for an instance, at the Areopagus in the city of Athens, engaged in dialogue, to proclaim the Word of God. From this, one can clearly understand that proclaiming involves dialogue, and dialogue with the people of other faiths.<sup>48</sup> Generally presumed that, Bible does not show more interest directly to dialogue, and actually throughout the Bible there are quite a lot of rejection of other religions especially in the Old Testament, indicating that only our religion is right, only YHWH is a real God. For instance, in the book of Exodus, Lord God Says to the Israelites, "I am the LORD, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgement" (Ex 6:6). In Isaiah, God says, "For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, do not fear, I will help you" (Is 41:13). Still some more strong words, God says, "I am the LORD, there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me" (Is 45:5). On the other hand, the expressions in many verses in the bible, exclusively in the New Testament, which shows that the love of God leads to love other persons as your own. For instance, in the Gospel of John, Jesus gives us a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you

are my disciples, if you have love for one another (cf. Jn 13:34-35). In this sense, dialogue with other religious faith traditions would mean, sharing of our own experiences with their experiences, which are the foundation for the faith, sensitivity, mutual openness, and mutual respect.<sup>49</sup>

Mission has its deepest source in God, who is in His wisdom and goodness chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (cf. Eph 1:19), by which, through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh (Jn 1:14), humans have access through the Holy Spirit to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (cf. Eph 2:18, 2 Pet 1:4). Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (cfs. Col 1:15, 1 Tim 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to all people as friends (cfs. Ex 33:11, Jn 15:14-15) and lives among them (cf. Bar 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself (cf. DV 2). Therefore, in short, one can say, God reveals Himself to all people, and further, He invites all to make friendship with Him and to live in fellowship and communion with Him. Thus, the initiative comes from God, and He wants all to come to share in the divine nature to have life in abundance.<sup>50</sup>

Now referring to the New Testament, one can see, the Mission of Jesus, which goes beyond the boundaries to reach out to the lost sheep of Israel, and at the same time, the open attitude towards all peoples. Jesus had dialogue with all, and gave an open invitation to all nations, to experience the Kingdom of God, which is not confined to the chosen people.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, tracing God's active presence in all religions, Jacques Dupuis says, considering from the biblical themes, one can understand the

<sup>49</sup> Cf. A. BONGIOVANNI, *Spirituality of Interfaith Dialogue. A Call to Live Together*, p. 2-4.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. T. ASCHEMAN SVD, "All Things to All People. Ongoing Formation for Intercultural Life and Mission", in: L. T. STANISLAUS SVD, M. UEFFING SVD (eds.), *Intercultural Living*, Vol. 1, Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (ISPCK) and Germany (Sankt Augustin): Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, 2015, p. 311.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND THE CONGREGATION FOR EVANGELIZATION OF PEOPLES, "Dialogue and Proclamation. Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue", 19 May 1991, n. 21, in: AAS 84 (1992), pp. 414-446.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. M. Q. NGUYEN, "Proposal of Ways for Preaching the Good News in the Digital Age", *Verbum SVD* 65/1-2 (2024), pp. 49-50.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. M. Q. NGUYEN, "Proposal of Ways for Preaching the Good News in the Digital Age", pp. 48-49.



expansive nature of religious experience, the revelation of God in creation, and the awed awareness that God and His Spirit range far beyond the boundaries of the human capacity, clearly indicates the links with non-Christian religions. Further, he adds, in such complex situations, concerning a theological evaluation of other religious tradition on the part of God's chosen people in the Old Testament and Christian Church in the New Testament cannot claim to be in a comprehensive way. Therefore, such negative attitude towards other religions can be cured today in a mutual comprehension and openness to dialogue, in which the theological evaluation moves to have positive approach to the other religious traditions.<sup>52</sup>

Ambrogio Bongiovanni points out very clearly in his book, *Interreligious Dialogue. Orientations for the Formation*, about the self-communication of God in the human history serves as an understanding of God's revelation to initiate dialogue with human beings. This dialogue is understood in terms of personal relationship of God with human beings, and it manifests an authentic encounter between human and the Absolute. Thus, God becomes common origin and goal of all peoples.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, Bongiovanni formulates his thoughts from Second Vatican Council that God's communication with human beings becomes God's desire to make all peoples to participate in His grace.<sup>54</sup> Thus, in this sense, love of God becomes a relationship with human beings, which further pushes every human to experience God in return. From this point of view, the vertical relationship is strengthened and after experiencing the love of God, one moves out of his/her way to strengthen horizontal relationship, which is to work together for promoting harmony and social justice in the wounded world.

## 5. GOD'S PLAN FOR THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE

God has a plan for the entire universe or cosmos is revealed in and through Jesus Christ (cfs. Eph

1:9-10, Col 1:26-27), where God reconciled Himself, to set free from all the bondages, and to draw the entire humanity into communion with Himself.<sup>55</sup> Thus, one can understand the love of God, which is, the self-emptying love, and it reached to the climax of giving oneself on the cross.<sup>56</sup> St. Paul says, God our Saviour, desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the Truth (cf. 1 Tim 2:3-4). From this point of view, one can be sure, there exist other religious traditions, which are not entirely the creation of humans, rather it is the initiative of God. Hence, these various religions and their spiritual traditions of the world, can be a great gift from the divine, and it is to be seen as in the realm of religious pluralism.<sup>57</sup>

To put it more concretely, one can say that it is through this understanding of building up the Kingdom of God in dialoguing with other religious faith traditions, one moves oneself to practice one's own religion faithfully, that the followers of that religion reach God. Therefore, God is active, both in the Church and in other religious traditions of the world, where everyone participates to build the Kingdom of God through dialogue with one another, and further, the Church enters into dialogue to recognize and to encourage the richness of God in other faith traditions, and to walk together towards Truth, which is ultimately the plan of God for the whole humanity.<sup>58</sup> As Ambrogio Bongiovanni expresses the deeper meaning of interreligious dialogue is a great gift, that allows all the people of God to be open to the hope for the true search and meaning for the entire humanity, and together to have a great goal of building up the Kingdom of God.<sup>59</sup> In this

<sup>55</sup> Cf. J. KUTTIANIMATTATHIL, *Practice and Theology of Interreligious Dialogue. A Critical Study of the Indian Christian Attempts Since Vatican II*, Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 1998, p. 580.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. F. WILFRED, "Dialogue Gasping for Breath? Towards New Frontiers in Inter-Religious Dialogue," *Vidyajyoti* 51 (October 1987), pp. 457-460.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. J. KUTTIANIMATTATHIL, *Practice and Theology of Interreligious Dialogue. A Critical Study of the Indian Christian Attempts Since Vatican II*, pp. 582-583.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. SECRETARIATUS PRO NON CHRISTIANIS, *The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions. Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*, Città del Vaticano: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1984, n. 13.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. A. BONGIOVANNI, L. FERNANDO SJ, V. EDWIN SJ, and G. SABETTA (ed.), *Interfaith Spirituality. The Power*

<sup>52</sup> Cf. J. DUPUIS SJ, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Maryknoll (NY): Orbis Books, 1997, pp. 29-30.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. A. BONGIOVANNI, *Il Dialogo Interreligioso. Orientamenti per la Formazione*, pp. 119-120.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. A. BONGIOVANNI, *Il Dialogo Interreligioso. Orientamenti per la Formazione*, p. 122.

regard, every religion, culture, and faith tradition want to preserve their own identity, because people are frightened in today's global context of losing the religious identity, when they come together for an encounter of dialogue. As a result, everyone tries to push the borders and identities too hard and not willing to co-operate and cross the boundaries to go beyond, thus one becomes lesser and lesser human. Therefore, in this sense, Thomas Kunnunkal says that in today's modern world, to be religious means to be open to inter-religious, to be cultural means to be inter-cultural, and to be human is to be inter-human,<sup>60</sup> which can enlarge the communitarian aspects and dimensions of living together.

## CONCLUSION

Besides conflicts and obstacles, the urgent need and call for dialogue in today's world are an increasingly major concerns of interreligious dialogue between the followers of different religions, cultural backgrounds, and ethnicities. People are living in a global world with multiple communities, religions, beliefs, ideologies, and practices. Colourful flowers of mutual harmony and prosperity can be blossomed through interreligious dialogue in the society at large. Interreligious dialogue is the best source of spreading the teachings of the Catholic Church and promote Gospel values, in which tolerance and acceptance of different diversities of spiritual traditions can come together and have a harmonious living.

Interreligious dialogue can also be a powerful communication at the human level and deeper level of understanding the other persons and faith traditions. The projections on the conflicts and obstacles of dialogue show the difficulties in mission, to spread out the harmonies living in the society. In this sense, Marcello Zago says, «Religions that cohabit the same region not only meet but sometimes clash. The only constructive way forward for humanity and for

religions themselves is dialogue, which presupposes mutual respect and co-operation. »<sup>61</sup> Finally, taking into the considerations of thoughts, teachings, and reflections of Pope Francis regarding interreligious dialogue make a foundational base for all people of God, who want to engage themselves willingly in dialogical ministry.

In this regard, Pope Francis makes a strong statement for a reflection at the *Vigil of Pentecost with the Ecclesial Movements* on 18<sup>th</sup> of May in 2013 addresses the faithful at the Peter's Square saying: «The Church must step outside herself. To go where? To the outskirts of existence, whatever they may be, but she must step out. Jesus tells us: "Go into all the world! Go! Preach! Bear witness to the Gospel!" (cf. Mk 16:15). But what happens if we step outside ourselves? »<sup>62</sup> We encounter the other, because with the full of faith, we encounter Jesus in the other. Jesus sets several examples to encounter the other in Gospel accounts. With faith, one must cultivate a "culture of Encounter" and "culture of friendship" with the other, and especially those who hold other beliefs<sup>63</sup> or faith traditions. Pope Francis says that in this "stepping-out", one is ready for an encounter,<sup>64</sup> which is also a cardinal focus and a keyword in interreligious dialogue. Thus, dialogue becomes an essential characteristic for a profound way of evangelizing the Gospel and its values through our own lives and actions.

<sup>61</sup> M. ZAGO OMI, "The New Millennium and the Emerging Religious Encounters", *Missiology: An International Review* XXVIII/1, (2000), p. 5.

<sup>62</sup> POPE FRANCIS, "Vigil of Pentecost with the Ecclesial Movements", Address of the Holy Father Francis, *Saint Peter's Square*, (18 May 2013), in: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130518\\_veglia-pentecoste.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130518_veglia-pentecoste.html) (accessed on: 03.04.2025).

<sup>63</sup> Cf. S. P. PUTHENPURACKAL SVD, "Missionary Constants: Relational Anchors in Mission as Encounter", *Verbum SVD* 61/2-3 (2020), p. 349.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. POPE FRANCIS, "Vigil of Pentecost with the Ecclesial Movements", Address of the Holy Father Francis, *Saint Peter's Square*, (18 May 2013), in: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130518\\_veglia-pentecoste.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130518_veglia-pentecoste.html) (accessed on: 03.04.2025).

of Confluence, ISPCK, Delhi: Allianz Enterprises, 2014, p. xiv (introduction).

<sup>60</sup> Cf. T. KUNNUNKAL SJ, "The Imperative for Cross Border Community Building", in: A. BONGIOVANNI, L. FERNANDO SJ, and V. EDWIN SJ (ed.), *Dialogue in a Pluralistic World*, Delhi: ISPCK Publications, 2013, pp. 13-14.

## Care for the sick as a “Missio Dei”

In many places around the world, missionaries dedicate themselves to caring for the sick, often in very precarious situations. Many religious sisters and brothers went especially to the so-called "mission countries" to continue the caring work of Jesus and thereby really give a very concrete interpretation and radiation of the Gospel message. Today this healing work is continued by their local fellow sisters and brothers and they experience this as a "missio dei", as pure imitation of Jesus Christ. So, we want to highlight the theme of "missio dei" from this angle, because it is a mission for those many who work for the sick that is more than mere care of the sick. It is in imitation of Jesus and like Jesus being close to the sick fellow man and doing so in his name and bringing Himself to the sick person.

### 1. Jesus savior and healer

Jesus was not a physician, but He healed many people. For a healing power emanated from Him. Above all, He had come to earth to accomplish, continue and provisionally complete the works of God in the world and in the lives of those in need of salvation. "Provisionally complete," for the final completion is yet to come at the end of time, when God will "reconcile all beings in heaven and on earth through Him" (Col. 1:20).

This introductory reflection says a great deal about, on the one hand, the direction Jesus can give to our reflection on caring for the sick, but it also sets certain limits. No, we cannot simply take Jesus as a model of our care for the sick without nuance. Of course, He remains the all-encompassing model for our lives and for all areas of our lives, thus also for our care of our sick fellow man, but we cannot simply adopt the way he approaches and heals the sick. For that we are missing something fundamental: we are only human, not God! With Jesus, we must always see his healing power from his God- and human-ness. As God, He is concerned for the redemption of man, and first of all for the redemption from the yoke of sin that weighs on

man; as man, like God Himself, He has real compassion for man's suffering. For God teaches us already in the Old Testament and this also becomes so visible and tangible in Jesus, that He is a God who is merciful who shows his mercy through His compassion for those who suffer and His forgiveness to those who sin and want to repent. It is this mercy that we, as the image of God, have inherited in our genes, so to speak, so that we as human beings can be merciful, or at least be called to be merciful, as God is merciful. It is, in other words, a well-known encouragement given to us by Jesus: "*Be merciful, as your Father in heaven is merciful*" (Lk. 6:36).

### John's question

To get a summary picture of Jesus' mission, we listen to the answer He gives to the question posed to Him by John's disciples, "*Are You who would come, or do we have another to expect?*" (Mt. 11:3). Jesus does not answer directly but refers to what He is doing, which should be clear to John that He is indeed the One who was to come. It is an answer that at first glance is bulging with healings, and the danger is that we see them only as an act of the particular "man" Jesus as He is reduced by some. "*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind see again and the lame walk, lepers become clean and the deaf hear, the dead rise, and to the poor the good news is proclaimed*" (Mt. 11:4-5). It is surprising that Jesus does not talk about the message He preaches, but only about the works He performs. This may mislead us and indeed see Him as the great Healer, the Physician par excellence. But on closer inspection, He is not talking about healing the sick, but rather about the radical change that takes place in people through His intervention, which cannot actually be obtained through mere human action. They are all miracles that He lists here, with a final plea for justice in the world where the poor are no longer oppressed. If this last one may seem out of place for a moment, we know by now how difficult it is for people to arrive at this

justice; here too a miracle of radical reversal is needed.

So, we can say that in all of His action as man here on earth, His deity shines through. He never acts as mere man, but as God who has appeared among men as man. With His actions He does indeed intervene in man in his earthly condition, but every action actually transcends this earthly condition. Something of the heavenly is revealed each time, where the blind will see and the lame walk, where all leprosy will be gone and where the deaf will hear and where only justice will be done. Jesus might as well have answered, "I have come to bring the Kingdom of God on earth." No, He will say that later, and even say that He is indeed King, but not of this world (cfr. Jn. 18:36). The message He conveys through the disciples to John actually refers to the prophet He Himself quoted at His first appearance in Nazareth. A prophet like John should be given a prophetic response. So John must have made the connection immediately as Jesus Himself made the connection during His first "homily": *"He opened the scroll and found the place where it is written, 'The Spirit of the Lord rests on me; for this purpose He has anointed me. To bring the good news to the poor he has sent me, to announce to prisoners their release and to the blind the light in their eyes, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year pleasing to the Lord'"* (Lk. 4:17-19).

All the healing stories we encounter in the Gospels will have to be seen against the background of this general mission statement. It is always more than healing; with each healing the way to the Kingdom of God is opened. Thus, it is striking that almost always the forgiveness of sins precedes the physical healing. But that does not take away from the fact that in the healings we also find clear indications of how we should deal with illness and suffering. So we can learn something from Jesus in his dealings with the sick. We would therefore like to dwell on some pericopes from the Gospel.

### **Jesus heals as part of his total redemption**

*"He crossed by boat and came into His city. There they brought to Him a paralytic who was lying on a bed. Seeing their confidence, Jesus said to the paralytic, 'Rest assured, friend, your*

*sins are forgiven you'"* (Mt. 9:1-2). We know the reaction of the scribes after this forgiveness of sins by Jesus: *"That man blasphemes God"* (Mt. 9:3). It is significant that Jesus forgives sins in a first move, manifesting his deity, because the scribes are right: only God can forgive sins. At the same time, by prioritizing the forgiveness of sins, Jesus shows the importance of restoring one's relationship with God that must come before everything else. True healing of a person can break through only when he is first reconciled to God and in the right. It is at the same time, as already indicated, a letting the Kingdom of God breakthrough in this person's life. That is Jesus' first movement: He came to earth to announce salvation and also to accomplish it. Every action of Jesus toward fellow human beings during his public appearance is a radiation or foreshadowing of this. He also indicates with it what is most important in life: a renewed relationship with God that will bear its beneficent fruit to the other relationships: the relationship with ourselves, with our fellow men, with all creation. We are urged to let our caring and healing actions toward fellow human beings also always be guided by focusing it on that wider perspective of redemption and seeing it as part of redemption. We must continue, as it were, the redemptive work of Jesus on earth, but then we must also see it in priority as an act of redemption and not reduce it as merely caring for and healing the sick body.

The story continues with the effective physical healing of the paralytic. *"But that you may know that the Son of Man is competent to forgive sins on earth, then He said to the paralytic, 'Get up, take up your bed and go home'"* (Mt. 9:6). We are struck by the three words: get up, take up your bed and go home.

The first word indicates immediate healing. The paralytic gains strength in his legs and can stand upright again. The physical healing takes place which is like a consequence of the moral healing. A person who is morally healed gains the strength to move forward in life again. It is the inner strength that is invoked in the paralyzed to manifest itself physically as well. When one no longer sees things in life, one sits down or even lies down and refuses to move anymore. When one finds new perspective in life, one gains the strength to move again.



Pick up your bed: the paralytic is urged to pick up his bed and carry it with him. No, he may not leave his history behind, but it is from this history that he must now live on. No one is ever cured forever. One heals partially and continues to carry many imperfections. In every life there will always be moments of suffering, but we are called to walk with them, to live with them, without letting them paralyze us.

Go home: the paraplegic is asked to reintegrate himself into society. It truly becomes a holistic healing: he is physically delivered from his paralysis, he is psychologically strengthened to accept his life situation, and he is socially brought back into the community. And all from what precedes: the restoration of the relationship with God through the forgiveness of sins.

Holism is a word that sounds modern. But unfortunately, it is often an unattainable ideal that hardly seems to be realized in healthcare. In the 1970s, there was a lot of talk about integrated nursing, the idea being to pay attention to all dimensions of the patient's life during care, rather than limiting it to a purely physical-technical act. Has this dream of integrated care gone up in smoke? Indeed, we often have to conclude that healthcare has become so medico-technical that there is hardly any room left to deal with people multidimensionally. However, this often does not require an extra effort, but an extra attention. From Jesus we learn how we can bring the Kingdom of God on earth by always seeing the human being first and foremost as the image of God and in our further actions meeting Jesus himself in our fellow man. We are called to develop our care from a pastoral basic attitude. This is completely different from how we now often interpret pastoral care as something totally separate and only relevant when the opportunity presents itself. With Jesus, this was the starting point and basic attitude that determined and directed everything else.

I want to end here with an example from life. During the covid pandemic, I was hit by the virus and ended up in the hospital. Things were very technical, with all the precautions of isolation. For example, meals were dropped off at the door and we had to pick them up ourselves, minimizing contact with the staff. One morning it sounded at the door,

"Breakfast," so we understood that the food was ready. The next morning, however, it sounded different: "Good morning, slept well? Your breakfast is at the door. Bon appetit." What a difference in approach, but what an effect on our psychic disposition when we really felt addressed as human beings. Breakfast tasted so much better because we had felt something of redemption welling up within us. We were more than a number, we were a human being, a fellow human being, a child of God. Those few words spoken in a friendly tone made all the difference!

### **Healing of Peter's mother-in-law**

We take one healing story that gives us a beautiful picture of Jesus' concern for the welfare of fellow man. Just as Jesus was fully committed to his Father, he was likewise fully committed to his fellow man. This is already a first observation: the totality with which He turns toward His fellow man. Every physical distance is eliminated and a very close personal relationship is established with the person whom Jesus meets. It is as if only this person counts: he or she receives his full attention and his total concern goes out to him or her.

We take a brief walk through the story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. Jesus arrives at Simon's home after a teaching in the synagogue. Immediately He is confronted with a distress there and the bystanders call for His help. *"Since Simon's mother-in-law was prey to a high fever, they called for his help for her"* (Lk. 4:38). Jesus is fully attentive to the concrete life situation of the person who passes his way. He is totally there for that one person, with a deep sympathy, openness, interest, which will develop into an equally deep mercy. It is from this mercy that healing can arise. *"Jesus gave a stern command to the fever. She was delivered from it, and immediately she arose and served them"* (Lk. 4:39).

Today I am that person to whom Jesus gives His full attention and stands ready to bestow His mercy and healing. Do I feel this compassionate, merciful attention of Jesus in my hurting existence and hear Him speak His healing and forgiving words to me? Only with Him can I obtain true healing, forgiveness, complete healing of all my wounds. In Jesus I feel fully restored and like Peter's mother-in-law

I can begin to minister to others. For the sympathy and mercy that I may receive from Jesus, I must also show myself to those who pass on my way. And then it is about that very concrete fellow human being, who needs my help, whether asked or unasked. To him my sympathy and mercy must go out. Every day I get countless opportunities to become the neighbor of him or her whom I meet, whether by chance or not. Am I for him or her like Jesus in Luke's story, am I that Good Samaritan for whom the need of a total stranger is more important than his planned journey, and do I see in that other Jesus himself? Seeing, meeting and loving Jesus in our fellow man is what makes our help for the other truly charity, *caritas*. "*All that you do for one of the least of my brothers, you have done to me*" (Mt. 25:40). Jesus himself, with his presence in fellow man, seals my love for that fellow man. It takes an effort, a daily effort to see Jesus himself in every person we meet. But only then can we say with St. Mother Teresa, "*I did it for You, I did it to You, Lord Jesus.*"

The attention, sympathy and healing mercy Jesus show for that one person is never limited to that one person. Jesus is open to everyone. It is God's love, at once very personal and universal, that Jesus radiates. Personal and universal are two words that we find difficult to place together from our purely human thinking. With God this is possible, in Jesus we see it realized, and as human beings we are called to this. Our love must always be personal and remain open to everyone without exception. That universal also refers to the willingness to always be ready with our love and not to give it only when it suits us, when it is in our schedule. "*At sunset, all those who were sick, suffering from many ailments, were brought to Him. He healed them by laying hands on them one by one*" (Lk. 4:40). Perhaps Jesus was tired from the past day and had planned to spend the evening quietly with Peter's family. Or He had anticipated spending the evening in prayer. But the people who came knocking with their need were given absolute priority. And the text explicitly says that He laid hands on them one by one. Jesus opens himself up to the masses, but will try to meet people personally there as well. With Jesus it never becomes mass work,

routine, but the personal encounter remains paramount.

Universal, yet personal: it is not opposites for Jesus. This example of Jesus is a true confrontation for all of us. How many times have we kept our door closed to the one who came knocking? And each time we may have had a legitimate excuse. Perhaps that excuse was that now was the time for our prayer. We know that Vincent de Paul was very clear about this: that *caritas* should always take priority, even if at the expense of our prayer. His argument was that we find the same Jesus we worship in the tabernacle also in the person we help with love and mercy. That became his famous "leaving God for God." Of course, it should not become an excuse not to pray, because if we do not come to know Jesus in our prayer, we will have great difficulty recognizing Him in our fellow man as well.

Jesus indeed prefers the concrete fellow man who comes knocking, He postpones His prayer for their sake, and we read how He will then consciously make time for prayer. "*When day had come, He went out and went to a solitary place*" (Lk. 4:42). His total givenness and availability to fellow man does not prevent Him from setting aside time for conversation with His Father. With Jesus, there seems to be no tension between them. For us, again, this is often problematic. How often do we complain of not having time for prayer because work demands us completely? While others withdraw into prayer, locking themselves up, as it were, in their own secure little world and becoming insensitive to the needs of their fellow man. Jesus goes with the needs of His fellow men to His Father, He dedicates them to Him. And from His prayer, He brings God's love into the world. His care for fellow man is like a reflection of God's love and mercy. We must strive in our lives for that unity between prayer and commitment, the "*ora et labora*". Mother Teresa's simple words can help us along this path: "*The fruit of silence is prayer; the fruit of prayer is faith; the fruit of faith is love; and the fruit of love is service.*" And we might add that it is from service, like Jesus, that we can enter silence, and so the circle is closed.

There is a fourth movement in the periscope, saying that Jesus does not fix himself in one place, but also wants to go to the other cities to

bring the Good News of the Kingdom of God (cfr. Lk. 4, 43-44). This will also be the ultimate message that Jesus will give to his disciples: go to all nations to proclaim to them the Good News. And the disciples will also understand this after Jesus' ascension and with the coming of the Holy Spirit: proclamation knows no bounds. In our secularized world, there is a danger that we shut ourselves away in a safe circle of like-minded people and barely let the word of the Good News ring out in the wider environment. We are afraid of being ridiculed. Pope Francis, on the other hand, constantly called us to go to the periphery and not to shut ourselves up in the sacristy. We can also apply this in our concrete care for fellow human beings. There are no limits here, and today there are many who live on the periphery and are inflamed with appropriate care. Nay, this should nor can leave us indifferent.

Four movements that guide the way we should be caring toward fellow human beings.

### **Jesus drives out the evil spirits**

We should also pay some attention here to the fact that the Gospel indicates in several places that Jesus very directly cast out devils. Some today would easily argue that it may have been mental patients who were considered to be possessed and brought to Jesus to be healed. In some place's epilepsy is explicitly mentioned, while in others it remains an open question whether it is really about someone who is possessed by the devil or was previously considered such.

However, a number of exorcism stories are very clear that it really did involve the devil possessing man. We take the story of the possessed man in the land of the Gerasene's. Here again we see the divine power that was present in Jesus and with which He was able to manifest His power over the devil. As if He wants to show us that evil never has the last word when we trustingly turn to Him.

What is striking about most of these exorcism stories and therefore what can we situate very nicely in this story?

At first, we see a man who has lost his human countenance, as it were, and at the same time possesses superhuman powers. *"Even with a chain no one could bind him anymore, no one could restrain him"* (Mk. 5:3-4). His behaviour

is aimed at self-destruction. *"Day and night, he walked among the tombs and on the mountains roaring and pounding himself with stones"* (Mk. 5:5). The devil has only one goal: to take control of man, to deprive him of his human dignity as a child of God and ultimately to plunge him into destruction. Here we see the physical effect of what evil causes in man morally. In this possessed man, what the devil has in store for man is magnified. When someone is in the grip of evil, he is totally overpowered by it and it is beyond human strength to break free from its grip. Only a force stronger than evil can bring salvation.

But then comes the confrontation with Jesus. In the Gospel, it is often the possessed who reveal the true identity of Jesus. Here too it sounds, *"What do you want of me, Jesus, Son of the most high God?"* (Mk. 5, 7). What the bystanders do not want to hear and keep denying, is presented to them by the devil. But precisely because the devil recognizes Jesus very directly as the Son of God, his reaction is also very fierce toward Him. For he recognizes in Him the one against whom he has been fighting for centuries from his insatiable pride. It does contrast with the temptation story of Jesus in the desert, where the devil asked Jesus to kneel down before him. Now it is the devil who kneels down because he knows he is the lesser in the battle. But his kneeling down is not out of reverence, but in the hope that he will be spared by Him. *"I beseech thee by God: do not hurt me"* (Mk. 5:7). Jesus had the power to destroy the devil here, but His time had not yet come. Nay, redemption will have to happen in another way by definitively breaking the absolute power of evil. At the same time, the power of evil is indicated by the word "Legion". *"For we are many"* (Mk. 5:9). But the power of Jesus is greater, and at the same time He shows here a kind of compassion towards the evil one, by responding to his request not to destroy him. We know the consequence of the story where two thousand pigs plunged into the lake and drowned. Even freed from man, evil continues to do its destructive work.

The story confronts us with the reality and presence of evil in the world and in human beings, including us. There is only one who can free us from evil, and that is the Lord. But we are expected to avoid being seized by evil in order to avoid coming totally under the

influence of evil and being totally controlled by it. The relationship between evil and sickness and suffering remains a reality because evil fundamentally disturbs our human nature and is the ultimate cause of our suffering and death. We now see the possessed man "*clothed and in his full mind*" (Mk. 5:15). With him, true healing had been accomplished through his deliverance from the power of evil. From Jesus he receives these words, "*Go home to your family and tell them what the Lord has done for you and how he has taken care of you*" (Mk. 5:19). The man is integrated back into his family, but is given the message to bear witness to God's mercy. He becomes a proclaimer of God's benefits.

Even in the expulsion of the devil, it becomes clear that Jesus is always both saviour and healer. But it is the redemption from evil that always takes place first, the physical healing being, as it were, an externalization of it. In our task of caring and healing, it is important to likewise maintain the link between redemption and healing and to see our work in healing already in the light of redemption and to entrust our healing work to the redemptive work of Jesus who is the actual healer. It makes us refer back to the book of Jesus Sirach where the healer is described precisely as the one who receives the healing power from God, "*for healing comes from the Most High*" (Sir. 38, 4).

## 2. Jesus "*ipse medicus, ipsa medicina*"

Augustine describes Jesus with the well-known statement, "*ipse medicus, ipsa medicina*": simultaneous physician and medicine. Jesus is both the savior and salvation, He brings salvation to people and at the same time is Himself the source of salvation. With the incarnation, not only is the sick person healed but the cause of the illness is also addressed. And the disease spoken of here is nothing less than pride. Augustine puts it this way: "*The cause of all disease is pride, for the cause of all sin is pride. When a physician follows a sick person, attending to the symptoms of the disease without removing its cause, the sick person seems better for a period, but the disease returns. To remove the cause of all disease, namely pride, the Son of God came to this earth and humbled Himself*" (Sermons on the Gospel of John, 25, 16).

We can now ask what this premise that Augustine puts forward has to do with caring for the sick that we want to take as the subject of our consideration. It invites us to always place our caring for the sick in a wider perspective. And that wider perspective is precisely human nature, the way human nature has been "afflicted" by the sin of pride, and how for this sin a healing perspective was offered through the redemptive work of Jesus. We remain subject to the disease of pride during this life, but we believe that a complete healing will eventually occur, a healing offered to us by Jesus, of which He is both the physician and the cure.

This reality of the presence of pride in our lives that has gripped the whole of human nature and, at the same time, the realization that pride no longer has the last word in life since redemption, casts a special perspective on our caring for fellow human beings. It deprives us, on the one hand, of the illusion that we can speak of healing only when we have eradicated the disease once and for all and of the false expectation that this can set in those we care for. But on the other hand, it also gives an additional dimension to our care that we can see in the broader light of salvation and as our human contribution to the work of redemption. We would like to briefly elaborate on these two aspects.

## Our concern will always be limited

In the medical world there is sometimes an expectation that with the further progress of science one will grow ever closer to an omnipotence with which one can master disease. Indeed, much progress has already been made, and diseases that previously seemed untreatable can now be treated and even completely cured. With the advent of antibiotics, many infections that previously led to death could be causally addressed and also permanently cured. For some infections, where a definitive cure cannot yet be offered as a prospect, such as the AIDS infection, medications have since been developed that bring the condition under control to such an extent that a virtually normal life can be led, which was unthinkable a few years ago. For cancers, more and more success is being



achieved in increasing the chances of survival with suitable therapy.

This can create the illusion that one will eventually be able to treat and completely cure any disease. It gives medicine the allure of omnipotence. But with the other side of the coin comes disappointment and even the accusation of not fulfilling the medical mission properly when treatment fails to achieve the expected cure. Physicians testify what superhuman expectations are sometimes placed upon them with the danger of being accused of not having acted carefully when the hoped-for and expected cure fails to materialize. It is as if they are only there to heal, and if they fail to do so they are not fulfilling their mission properly.

The covid pandemic, which paralyzed the entire world, naturally put a big dent in this pursuit of medical omnipotence. Very quickly one had to admit that one is not omnipotent at all and even completely impotent to be able to overpower this quasi-invisible virus in time. It was thought that such an infection would be found only in the history books, at a time when people did not have the appropriate medication or had no understanding at all of how viral infections work. Who would have thought that a kind of plague would once again sweep through the world like the Black Death and that we would have to wait so long to come up with a suitable vaccine, the efficacy of which is not even one hundred percent assured? Man's fragility has completely undermined the illusion of omnipotence.

Is it then one of the positive effects of the covid pandemic that we were forced into a greater sense of reality and that we could now refer the omnipotence of medicine to the realm of illusions for good? It is in this reality that will always continue to run into limitations that we must situate our work in healthcare. From our human capabilities, we must indeed do everything we can to prevent illness, to try to cure illness, but above all to support the sick person in his sickness. The word "heal" should no longer be translated as being able to heal absolutely, but rather as alleviating pain, increasing comfort in suffering, and further searching for appropriate therapies to cure disease or at least alleviate suffering. It is in this reality that physicians and caregivers must move and not reach for goals that are not theirs

to achieve, to avoid falling into the disillusionment of not being able to perform what they set out to do or being falsely accused of not achieving what is expected and ultimately even required of them.

Top medicine and optimal care are too often and too exclusively linked to total cure and return of optimal condition. Indeed, advertisements placed by certain private hospitals in Eastern and Southern countries to attract clients for their expensive treatments create the illusion that total healing of any ailment is guaranteed when one goes to their hospital. This, of course, is pure business, and at the same time misleading and keeps up the image of the so-called omnipotence of medicine, if only one can turn to the best doctors in the world. It would be good against each of this to place the efforts of the many health care providers who work day and night to heal the suffering of people in their sickness, but healing in the true sense of the word. Physicians would therefore be better off calling themselves healers, masters of healing who work with other health care providers to look after sick people and see with them how best to help and truly heal them, even when total healing is not possible at all. But then it is expected that these healers not only accept their own limitations but also live them in a positive way and consider not only total healing as a success but also any act that makes a person more whole in his brokenness and suffering. This will not detract from the scientific endeavour to progress further in the efforts to heal, but will make that endeavour more realistic with the acceptance of human limitation always remaining as a boundary that cannot be crossed as a perspective. A boundary that can be shifted, but can never be completely eliminated. It also requires a change in mentality among the sick who must refrain from setting unrealistic expectations before their healers and caregivers. Finally, it requires a mutual honesty in which the true nature of the illness and likely prospects for cure can be openly discussed. After all, some sick people do not tolerate their healers confronting them with reality and only desire to hear good news. When one cannot provide it immediately, they quickly turn to another, hoping that he or she will then announce the glad tidings of a possible total cure. And some healers find it beneath their

scientific status to admit that their possibilities are limited, because they refuse to admit that the limited nature of human nature cannot be tinkered with indefinitely. They continue to strive for what is too high for them: some kind of divine power to ultimately become masters of life itself and thereby be able to put off inevitable death more and more. With the vain hope that one day they would invent the elixir of life to finally master death as well. Then they could truly call themselves "god," men who could cure even the last illness, death.

### **Our care as part of and in the perspective of final redemption**

We can argue that we should also always see our caring in the light of salvation and as a participation in salvation. This ennobles our caring and healing towards fellow human beings and makes it a divine mission, a "missio dei." If we just rejected the divine power to be pursued because it is simply a repetition of what has been manifest in human nature since the beginning of humanity as a result of pride, the cause of all sin and the greatest sin, which could and can only be cured by the only true healer, Jesus Christ as the Son of God, we want to talk here about a divine mission that is indeed offered to us, namely, the healing and care of fellow human beings who are sick. And this as part of the total redemption that is offered to us beyond the limitations of our human nature as a perspective and also as a step toward this redemption. With our healing and care, we may participate in the wider redemption offered to us by Jesus. We become co-redeemers, as it were, without wanting to write redemption as such on our account. Through our healing and care, we allow the glow of final redemption to descend into the temporality of our earthly existence, and our human contribution takes on a divine dimension.

It is Jesus Christ who is the only one who has brought us salvation and offers it to each one as the ultimate new perspective of this life. From now on, our life is focused on the resurrection and no longer stops at death. Death has lost its absolute power over man and has become only a transition to the final life. Once we allow this reality to penetrate us, everything we do and experience will be coloured by it and will also be interpreted differently. Even illness and

suffering will be profoundly affected by this perspective, and the healing and care given in illness will, on the one hand, feel completely subordinate to this final healing and total healing, but, on the other hand, will also place itself on the path to this final total salvation. It is as if, through the healing and care we offer someone, we are already giving a foretaste of the final redemption. This becomes very clear when we abandon the craving for omnipotence just described to always want to heal completely but, on the contrary, continue to put all our energy into the true healing of the human being, even when every prospect of total healing is absent. True healers and caregivers also continue to give their best to these people in order to make them already now feel something of the perspective of the resurrection. They do this in imitation themselves of Jesus Christ and in their actions become, as it were, foreshadowing of the one and true Physician who is Jesus Christ and who alone can give total healing, total victory over death. They do it likewise to Jesus Christ Himself, remembering the word He communicated to them and to us that everything we do to one of the least of His brothers and sisters is done to Him (cfr. Mt. 25:40). Acting like Jesus and acting towards Jesus then becomes that totally unique interpretation of healing and caring for fellow human beings and makes this healing and caring a divine mission asked of us Christians. Perhaps herein lies the core of a Christian-inspired healing and caring and also makes all the difference. It gives to our healing and care a perspective that always extends beyond the mere healing and care we offer. We are strengthened by our faith in the resurrection when we nevertheless continue to heal and care for a sick person who no longer has any prospect of being healed with all the human capabilities we have and with an abundance of love, in order to make him or her, as already indicated, already feel the perspective of the joy of the resurrection. It always reminds me of the story where Mother Teresa in Calcutta picked up a dying person from the street and brought him to her home where he died after a few hours. But that final act of love gave him back the human dignity that he had totally lacked for so long. *"I have lived like an animal, and now I may die like an angel,"* were his last words. If



Photo from SVD International Conference on Mission at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome

that is not resurrection joy that this man was allowed to receive during the last moments of his life here on earth, a joy that would soon break through to him in full. That also indicated the sense that even for someone who no longer had any prospect of healing and who was certain to die after a few hours, we could still muster the energy to surround him with loving care. If this were to happen more in our current caregiving, perhaps many a question of euthanasia would simply never be asked. For then, through loving presence and care, the hopelessness through which suffering may be scarred regains a perspective, a perspective that extends beyond death. It is that which becomes so evident in palliative care, where healing and care has abandoned all pretence of wanting to heal yet and is only concerned with alleviating suffering as much as possible. What added value can this palliative care have when in the heart of this care the perspective of resurrection is allowed to shine. Then death is experienced as a transition to real life. It was this that Teresa of Lisieux could exclaim in her death throes, "*I am entering life.*" No, in our healing and care, we cannot expect that everyone will be able to utter that, but let us make sure that in a high-tech medical framework, attention to the human being remains intact and remains the priority. Wasn't that the tragedy experienced by many when people affected by covid infection died in intensive care without being able to say goodbye to their loved ones. The worst suffering was the enforced isolation and being surrounded only by masked caregivers who looked more like astronauts than caregivers

who, because of the high risk of infection, were no longer able to give a warm hand or a gentle caress.

Jesus is presented as the ultimate **physician and medicine**, who saves humanity from evil through his redemptive death by forgiving sins, often prioritizing spiritual healing before physical.

Beyond being the **physician**, Jesus is also the **medicine**. His divine power emanated from his body, as seen in instances where people were healed by simply touching his garment: "Wherever He went, to villages or towns or hooves, they laid the sick in the marketplace, and they asked Him to be allowed to touch at least the hem of His garment. And whoever touched Him was saved" (Mk. 6:56). Another account highlights this: "If I but touch His garments, I shall be saved. Immediately the well of her blood dried up, and she felt by her body that she was healed of her ailment. But Jesus, who Himself immediately felt that a power had emanated from Him, turned around in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?'" (Mk. 5:28-31). These passages demonstrate the substantial presence of divine power within him.

This understanding extends to today. We can pray to Jesus for healing, finding strength in the belief that he sympathizes with our suffering. He complements human medical efforts spiritually. Through the **Eucharist**, Jesus remains present as a continuous medicine, offering the same healing power that emanated from him. This is particularly emphasized in the **Viaticum**, the Eucharistic bread given to the dying.

For caregivers, it's crucial to remember Jesus' divine presence as both physician and medicine. By integrating this spiritual dimension into our care, we not only provide physical comfort but also offer Jesus himself as a remedy, becoming both physician and medicine, as St. Augustine noted. This profound perspective transforms the act of caring into a holistic experience, where faith and compassion converge to bring true solace and healing, mirroring Christ's own transformative touch in the lives of those suffering. It's a call to embrace our role as conduits of divine grace in every act of service.

## 150 YEARS – The Growth of SVD Mission and the Future

A religious society's growth is not a result of human efforts; it is always done with the grace of God. History tells the truth, and it does not lie. Historical facts show how growth has happened over the years. The Society of the Divine Word, for the last 150 years, has been steadily growing, of course, with ups and downs in the historical lane, but always on the uphill climb to reach the peak. Thus, it has kept pace, grown and looked forward. The first part of the article, which is short, is about the growth of the Society. The second part deals with the future of SVD mission: reflecting on current trends and paradigms of mission, I would like to give some key aspects that could be seen as the future course of SVD mission.

### 1. 150 Years - The Growth of SVD Mission

#### 1.1. Mission During Arnold Janssen Period

Arnold Janssen, in his sermon at the inaugural Mass on 8 September 1875, said, "The purpose of this house is nothing else than to help proclaim the Gospel among the peoples who do not know God at all or not in the right way; to attract young men for this task and to send them out as trained missionaries."<sup>1</sup> This set the tone for his idea of mission. He was convinced that European missionaries must go to other continents to preach the word of God. He took advantage of German colonies, like Togo and Papua New Guinea, as destinations for sending missionaries; he also asked the German government to support the missionaries. The motive was clear: people should receive the good news.

Arnold had an earnest desire to work for the conversion of people. He said that "a missionary in a foreign country desires not only to minister to the indigenous Christians but to work for the conversion of pagans as well."<sup>2</sup> To him, it was

self-evident that the local church must be in a healthy state as a precondition for the flourishing of the mission church. Thus, the stress was on establishing the local church. At the same time, he wanted to work in Europe, saying, "We can expect worthwhile accomplishments in the foreign missions only if God grants that we first become reunited in the faith in our western world."<sup>3</sup> Before the death of the Founder, the Society was present in 15 countries.

#### *Mission Strategy and Methods*

The mission approach was determined mainly by the needs of the local place—mission methods at the initial stages needed to be spelled out. Preaching the good news to the local people was apparent in China, Argentina, and Togo. Strengthening the faith in Argentina and East Europe was significant. Establishing a school was considered an essential part of mission work. Arnold wrote to Argentina, "A parish without a Christian elementary school is only half a parish, and often not even that..."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Japan's education ministry was vital to enter into that society. Given the local situation, higher education was clearly in mind; thus, missionaries were encouraged to prepare for higher education. The future of the missions among the Afro-Americans in the United States depended on the schools. Starting dispensaries (China), helping the locals for future employment (Togo), rearing pigs and horses, and growing plantations (Papua New Guinea) were considered significant missionary activities.

Arnold's promotion of scientific work, particularly Wilhelm Schmidt's *Anthropos*, was a significant and forward-thinking aspect of his approach. He wrote, "If the Holy Spirit is

<sup>1</sup> "Arnold Janssen's Inaugural Sermon, September 8, 1875," in *Arnold Janssen Yesterday and Today*, Peter McHugh, ed., Analecta 63/III, 1998, 151.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold Janssen, "The Qualities of a Missionary," in

*Arnold Janssen Yesterday and Today*, 178.

<sup>3</sup> John Bettray, Arnold Janssen's Significance for Modern Mission Work," in *Arnold Janssen Yesterday and Today*, 371.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 377.



calling you to do something for the general public in the fields of ethnography and linguistics, I shall be happy to support you to the best of my abilities and to the extent that I see in it God's holy will"<sup>5</sup> (8 November 1904). The study of anthropology was considered significant to be effective in mission work, reflecting Arnold's progressive and forward-thinking approach.

Arnold promoted the study of local languages to serve the mission, and due to his background in publication, the importance of having a press was also considered significant for a successful mission. The publication of the *Little Messenger of the Sacred Heart of Jesus* (1874), *Stadt Gottes* (City of God - 1878), and *St. Michaels Calendar* (1880) were some excellent examples of spreading the mission among people.

## 1.2. SVD Mission Frontiers till Vatican II

After the death of Arnold Janssen in 1909, the 4th GC set the tone with 630 constitutions, with minor alterations. They remained in force till 1967. Four GCs (4th to 8th) were held up till Vatican II (1962-1965). At this time, the Society was present in 38 countries. Thus, the constitutions guided the Society, keeping it firm in missionary commitment, expansion, and missionary formation. The Society mainly concentrated on lifestyle, spiritual exercises, rules and regulating the members and community life, and so forth. Indeed, the traditional methods of preaching, conversion of the people, and improving the lives of the people were at the forefront.

The 5th GC (1920) discussed an essential range of questions regarding mission work both overseas and at home, e.g., the education of new mission doctors and explicit support for mission propaganda. No new mission approaches or orientation was given till the 8th GC (1958) when Fr. John Schütte was elected as superior general. He had an extensive framework of mission methods and approaches. The *ad gentes* mission was prominent, but he gave meaning to this work with profound theological and missiological perspectives. This chapter acknowledged the modern means and methods for missionary work.

## Mission Approaches

Over the years, the mission approach has evolved, with the dedication of our missionaries shining through. The first missionaries to Indonesia (1913) were given strict instructions to follow the Jesuits' method of working – preparing catechumens with proper instructions before baptism.<sup>6</sup> This commitment to the cause made the role of catechists and their training a cornerstone of our missions in Indonesia, India, and beyond. The establishment of schools in the missions was a significant step. These schools offered education, catechism, and other religious instructions. The establishment of hostels in Asia, Africa, and European countries further underscored our dedication to the mission.

Giving social aid was also part of the mission approach. Along with this, the people received skill's training for self-reliance. The brothers were active in various trades, such as tailors, locksmiths, shoemakers, masons, builders, and so forth. A few prominent trade schools were started in Indonesia. One of the successful projects in Papua New Guinea was building a boat (Queen of the Rosary) and making it available for the people.

The impact of the SVD's activities in translation and publication has been profound. The printing press and publication continued in many countries, leaving a lasting impression. The SVD's contribution to the translation of the Bible in India was particularly notable. Fr. Stanislaus Wald's translation of the Old Testament in Hindi and Bp. *Hermann Westermann's* publication of the Sunday readings and later the Sunday Missal in Hindi were not just popular, but also deeply impactful. The importance of learning the local language for mission work was thus underscored, and our achievements in this area are a source of pride for the Society of the Divine Word.

## 1.3. SVD Mission Initiatives after Vatican II

In 1965 and following, the world experienced many innovations. Science and technology transformed the world, education and research expanded, the standard of living improved greatly, and so forth. At the same time, insecurity, anxiety, and the age gap between

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 379.

<sup>6</sup> Friz Bornemann and others, *A History of Our Society*, Analecta SVD – 54, Rome:1981, 347.

young and old grew; new ideologies sprung up, individual freedom was asserted, and so forth. Thus, the idea of traditional mission was questioned.

The 9th GC of 1967/1968 was undoubtedly one of the most important in the Society's history. The renewal process and sturdy of the constitutions led to their approved; they clarified the internal connection between mission, religious, and community life. They emphasized the character of the Society rather than the juridical one, stressing the word of God, service, sacrifice, and reaching out to others.<sup>7</sup> The final approval of the Constitution was in 1983. As such, before Vatican II, the Society dealt with the juridical nature of the Society; later, it dealt with the evangelical nature of the Society.

### **Mission Approaches**

In the light of spreading the word of God where this is not known or insufficiently known, missionaries were involved in evangelization work according to the local situation. Along with that, they were engaged in socio-economic development. In 1967, the SVD bishops launched a large-scale program known as the "Flores-Timor Plan," which had nearly 350 projects to aid the development of the people.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, confreres were involved with development plans in various countries. The 10th GC (1972) emphasized that missionary involvement included evangelization and human development.

Using the local language and adapting to local cultures were set as norms for missionary work. Solidarity with the poor and oppressed was central in the 12th GC (1982). The theme "Passing Over" of 13th GC (1988) was fascinating and brought fresh thinking to understanding and working in the local place. This chapter singled out five fundamental areas for our action in the years ahead: local churches, dialogue, inculturation, secularization, and integral liberation. This chapter also went into more detail regarding our goals: primary evangelization in the nascent churches, accompanying faith communities, forming laity, working in favor of ethnic minorities, and

finally, the option for the poor and marginalized. Thus, these approaches gained prominence in the provinces/regions/missions.<sup>9</sup>

Emphasis on frontier missions, dialogue, inculturation, and communication were essential in the missions from 1988 onwards. Although cooperation with the laity was essential for mission before the 14th GC (1994), it highlighted the urgency of our collaboration with the laity. The 15th GC (2000) gave a new approach for looking into our mission – prophetic dialogue. Four dialogue partners were identified – people with no faith community and faith-seekers, poor and marginalized, and people of different cultures. Four Characteristic Dimensions – mission animation, Biblical apostolate, justice / peace and the integrity of creation, and communication (media) – were listed clearly as our priorities and the forms of our action. More concrete ministries were also outlined in this chapter: urban ministry, equality of women, migrants, refugees and displaced people, media, HIV/AIDS, ministry among Indigenous people, and collaboration with the laity. Thus, as the years progressed, mission approaches and ministries varied because of local needs and the contextual approach to the realities of the world and the church.

Although interculturality has been part of Society's way of life, the 17th GC (2012) stressed this aspect and formed Congregational Directions – ten *ad extra* and five *ad intra* – which guided the PRMs in their mission. The 18th GC (2018) again pointed out the importance of spiritual transformation and gave four areas to concentrate on – putting the last first, the integrity of creation, the digital era, and the SVD lay partners. The 19th GC (2024) again focused on ecology, family, youth, the SVD lay partners and digital media. Thus, in the last few years, the areas of mission indicated were to continue within the prism of prophetic dialogue.

<sup>7</sup> Const. 102, *Constitutions and Directory of the Society of the Divine Word*, Techny 1968, 109.

<sup>8</sup> Friz Brnemann, *A History of Our Society*, 351.

<sup>9</sup> See Andrzej Miotk, *The General Chapters of the Society of the Divine Word (1884-2012): The Historical Journey in the Footsteps of the Founder: The Response to the Challenges of the Times*, Analecta 95, Rome: 2017.

## 2. Future of the Society of the Divine Word

### 2.1. Going Beyond Maintenance of Mission to Innovative Mission

Being a missionary congregation, we have gone far and wide in the world, preaching and actualizing the word of God. Our mission has flourished. Many have worked hard and we see the result today. But where are we now and what is our future? Maintaining the mission of our past is good, but if we don't reflect on it, it can be a death trap for the future of mission. Today's context should create a new consciousness, motivating us to innovative mission because the world demands it, and the Spirit invites us. Everyone knows how fast the world is changing and challenging missionaries. Robert S. Rivers, in his book *From Maintenance to Mission*, points out that when “we view the goals of *Go and Make Disciples*, we heighten the perspective of the church as a contrast society.”<sup>10</sup> When the church is involved in mission, “it does not lend itself to quick-fix strategies. Rather, it challenges us to systematic change.”<sup>11</sup> This change comes when the goals of our Society have a substantially clear mission vision with new initiatives and proactive measures. Institutions have to become missionary institutions with creative ministries. New approaches must be developed, especially in pastoral activities and educational institutions. Indeed, the church cannot remain in maintenance mode; she responds to the existential situations where the Spirit is calling. Rediscovering the Founder's charism in the contextual ministries with a clear shift of emphasis from maintenance to mission<sup>12</sup> is the future of the religious. This is also true in other places. The shift is towards contextual mission in establishing the Kingdom of God. Pope Francis challenges us continuously by saying that the church is not a “toll house,” “recreation club,” or “museum” but “permanently in a state of mission” (EG 27). The challenge is to shift from a maintenance mode to innovative mission.

<sup>10</sup> Robert S. Rivers, *From Maintenance to Mission: Evangelization and the Revitalization of the Parish*, New York: Paulist Press, 2005, 242.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, xii.

<sup>12</sup> CBCI, 32nd Plenary Assembly, 2016, “Final Statement,” <http://www.cbci.in/Messages.aspx>

### *New wine in the new wineskins*

In the context of mission, the metaphor of putting new wine into new wineskins (Mt 9:17) emphasizes the need for alignment between the substance of the good news (the new wine) and the methods and structures through which it is delivered (the new wineskins). The substance of mission with fresh expressions is prophetic dialogue, creator mission, transhumanist mission, and so forth. The new wineskin is method – the innovative, flexible, and contextually relevant strategies that allow this mission to flourish in challenging environments. This involves proper discussion, discernment, and decision-making in order to apply the right approach to make God's love more vibrant in Society. The contexts are different; as a society, we work in varied situations in developed, developing, and underdeveloped countries. The socio-economic situations are different. Paying attention to the local culture and traditions is paramount. The problems faced by the local people continue to change in some countries. Thus, it is difficult to decide which method one has to apply to bring God's love, establish the Kingdom of God, and work for justice, peace, and freedom of the people.

The essence of the good news does not change; how we express it can change according to theology, local interpretations, etc. Here, the synodal method helps us to dialogue and discern the proper expression of the *missio Dei*. The Society of the Divine Word has to pursue intellectual discussion and research on these correct expressions of mission and disseminate them among the people. The proper strategies to implement mission orientations need creative effects and attractive and transformational ways.

### 2.2. Creative disciples...who are they?

Creative disciples, in the Christian sense, are not just followers of Jesus Christ. They are individuals who use their God-given gifts, talents, and imagination to express their faith, live out the Gospel in innovative ways, and address the challenges of the world. This form of discipleship is not a burden, but a source of joy and fulfillment, as it allows us to explore fresh, transformative ways to engage with our faith and contribute to the Kingdom of God.

Creativity is part of being made in the image of God, the Creator. Creative disciples reflect

God's nature through their ability to imagine, innovate, and create beauty. In this sense, creativity is seen as a way to glorify and point others to God. Creative disciples think outside the box. They engage with the world's challenges – poverty, injustice, environmental issues, and more – by thinking of innovative ways to bring about healing and transformation. They embody holistic discipleship, where faith is lived out through concrete actions that affect change. They find ways to adapt the timeless truth of the Gospel in modern, postmodern, or multicultural contexts. This adaptability is a source of reassurance and confidence, as it shows that while the message remains unchanged, the delivery method can vary to fit cultural sensitivities and contemporary realities. Creative disciples are resilient and open to change, adapting to new circumstances with faith and flexibility.

The 19th GC theme is "' Your light must shine before others' (Mt 5:16): Faithful and creative disciples in a wounded world." The Chapter Statement says, "Our approach to mission is influenced by the interplay between creativity, culture, and education."<sup>13</sup> The ethical grounding is supported by structured systems that sustain creative ministries, allowing for an enduring impact. Such systems ensure that initiatives are launched and maintained effectively, allowing for long-term benefits and continuous growth in the communities they serve. This creative strategy could be characterized by commitment, the conviction that our mission remains relevant, being ready to face the wounds, being touched and transformed by the wounds, and showing effective approaches in the field. The 19th GC reiterated, "We uphold creativity, as embodied in our Constitutions, in which we are encouraged to 'foster a sense of personal initiative and responsibility in carrying out our missionary task. Ever open to the signs of the times, the demands of the apostolate... (c.119.1)'"<sup>14</sup>

The big-heartedness of the Society allows us to venture into any ministry according to the local context, of course, with the consent of the superiors. This element of creativity helps to explore new liturgies, worship formats, or art

forms that reflect the diverse beauty of the body of Christ. This helps to develop creative prayer movements, such as prayer labyrinths, interactive prayer stations, or digital prayer groups. Creativity leads to innovative charitable work, such as new microfinance models, clean energy projects, or community-based solutions to food insecurity. In education, creative disciples might reform outdated systems or introduce new methods of teaching that emphasize holistic development and critical thinking rooted in a Christian worldview. In social action, some ways are asserting justice through mass movements, mass protests, digital coordination, human rights and dignity, and so forth.

The future depends on how creative we are in our mission approaches and ministries. The situation and the perspectives of the people are changing very fast. But often, we are struck with our old perspective or old ways of doing mission. Change is hard; change needs new thinking; conviction to change and work with newness needs courage, risk, and forthrightness. The future of SVD mission depends not just on individual creativity, but on how far each PRM and each confrere is creative. What methodology does one adopt? How is evaluation done based on the progress of new approaches or new ministries? Here, the method, process, collective responsibility, collective action and evaluation are significant. This collective responsibility is what unites us and makes us feel part of a larger purpose. The mission approach needs a coherent and communitarian dimension with a proper method and plan of action. Otherwise, there may be some creative individual SVD disciple, but the future may not be bright with this approach. The Society's future depends on how we are adaptive, innovative, and willing to experiment with new ways to share the Gospel and embody the love of Christ in the world.

### 2.3. Prophetic Witness

The prophets primarily have a relationship with God and are inspired by God. Born out of this experience and the reality of people, they announce the vision of God to the people, announcing good news, denouncing evil, and showing alternatives to the people. The notion of a prophet from the biblical tradition is

<sup>13</sup> *Faithful to the Word (FTW)*, Documents of the 19<sup>th</sup> General Chapter SVD 2024, Rome, no. 6, 2024, 59.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.



vibrant. Their experience of God fills them with passion (Sir 41:1; Zech 7:9ff) and this makes them criticize the political, economic and religious abuse of power, namely, corruption in courts (Mic 3:11; Is 5:23), financial exploitation (Am 2:6-8; 8:4-5), perversion of justice (Jer 8:8), fraud (Hos 12:8-9), salaries (Jer 22:13) and so forth. Today, Christians are called to continue the prophetic mission of Jesus (Lk 4: 16-20). The prophets rarely refer to themselves as such; in doing so, they become "false prophets." Others have to point out by seeing how they witness life that they are prophets

James Conley says, "To be prophets of life is to demonstrate God's uniquely personal love for every human life." He asserts, "Prophets point directly to humanity. Prophets see our sinfulness, virtue, limitations, and potential. Prophets see reality. Prophets see truth."<sup>15</sup> The Society's commitment to the prophetic witness of the church includes the defense of the common good, caring for the people at the peripheries, working for the vulnerable – marginalized women, migrants, refugees and the principles of truth and justice. Bonhoeffer exhorts "the Church to abandon sterile religiousness for a truly prophetic and evangelical style."<sup>16</sup>

Pope Francis, in a meeting with the Union of Superiors General, said, "...religious especially follow the Lord, prophetically. It is this witness that I expect of you. Religious should be men and women who can wake up the world."<sup>17</sup> He calls the church prophetic and shows authentic witness in this complex world. Pope Francis's vision of prophetic mission is holistic, encompassing both spiritual and social dimensions. He challenges the church to be a dynamic and responsive presence in the world, rooted in the Gospel, and deeply committed to justice, peace, and the dignity of all people. His call is not only to be prophetic in words but also in actions, embodying the love and mercy of Christ in every aspect of its mission.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2013/10/-fulfilling-our-prophetic-mission>

<sup>16</sup> <https://theologicalstudies.net/wp-content/uploads/-2022/08/28.4.6.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Antonio Spadaro, "Svegliate il mondo!" Colloquio di Papa Francesco con i Superior General, *La Civiltà Cattolica* 165 (2014/1): 5.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Ufok Udoekpo, *Israel's Prophets and the Prophetic Effect of Pope Francis*, Oregon: Wipf and

Given the world situation, Pope Francis exhorted the 19<sup>th</sup> GC participants during the Papal Audience, "to be prophetic hope *for every culture*."<sup>19</sup> and to grow in prophetic witness. This is an urgent call to everyone and gives hope to everyone. This is the future because the world demands it, and God wants it. The result of being a prophet is inevitable. Thomas Hughes says, from the experience of Latin America, "The prophet is persecuted, cursed, slandered as an agitator, attacked, imprisoned, expelled. Many pays with their lives, some massacred in groups."<sup>20</sup> In other countries, the church experiences the same. The challenge is to visualize what a prophetic witness is in a context. Today, witnessing to faith can be of *prophetic diakonia*, *prophetic compassion*<sup>21</sup> and becoming *eco-prophets*. Shying away from this mean running away from religious life.

Timothy Radcliffe says, "This is a time of crisis and...the church is renewed through crisis. The story of salvation is about crises that led to the Renaissance. This difficult time for Religious Life will ultimately be a blessing and lead to renewal, perhaps in ways we cannot anticipate. But this will only happen if we are not obsessed with survival."<sup>22</sup> Thus, looking at survival, the future of the SVD is to be more prophetic, to embody their qualities, and strive to live like them. One is mistaken if they say that this character is only for some. Categorically, every member has to grow in prophetic witness; every ministry should embody this aspect to be relevant to the world. The future of society depends not on how to survive but on how we carry on with prophetic witness.

The prophetic dialogue paradigm of mission can be done only when we grow as prophets. Otherwise, we may dialogue for survival without depth. "We affirm that witness does not

Stock, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis Message, FTW, 6, 71.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Huges, "Consecrated Life and Prophetic Mission: A Latin American Perspective" in *Mission Beyond Ad Gentes*, Jacob Kavunkal and Christian Tauchner, eds., Siegburg: Franz Schmitt Verlag, 2016, 67.

<sup>21</sup> Stanislaus Lazar, "Mission in the African Church in the Light of Sexual Abuse and the COVID-19 Pandemic," *SEDOS*, 54/11-12 (2022): 35-36.

<sup>22</sup> Timothy Radcliffe, Foreword, in *A future Full of Hope?* Gemma Simmonds, ed., Dublin: The Colomba Press, 2012, 7.

preclude dialogue but invites it, and that dialogue does not preclude witness but extends and deepens it.”<sup>23</sup> Can we identify some confreres as prophets, living now in our provinces, regions, and missions? Dom Hélder Câmara asked: “What is it in you that no one dares to call you a revolutionary (prophets)?” Similarly, we ask ourselves, “What is it in us that no one calls us prophets?”

## 2.4. Foster Transforming Culture

Leslie Newbigin calls for *committed pluralism* in contrast to agnostic pluralism.<sup>24</sup> Committed pluralism takes other worldviews seriously but dares to raise questions about different cultures and other faith traditions. Authentic dialogue is very significant today. Ensuring prophetic dialogue with cultures and religions requires analysis, reflection, contemplation, and evaluation of different cultures. We are so familiar with inculturation that we talk of interculturalization. Inculturation is a slow process, but a critical concern is that, as missionaries, we have to be involved in it. Flowing with cultural trends and practices is a way to death, as these currents can sweep one away. Serious study of cultures is a challenge. As missionaries, there is no choice but to study, analyze, discuss, and dialogue with cultures. Cultural practices or myths can be changed when they do not resonate with the gospel. As Christians, we believe truth is objective, accessed via revelation (Deut 29:29). God reveals truth through the Word of God (1 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:19-21), the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, culture is analyzed through the prism of the Word of God. Here, a missionary becomes an agent to change to those cultures not resonating with the gospel. Change is challenging without the synodal approach and collective responsibility of the people.

Inculturation is not just about expressing Jesus’s events within the religious and cultural traditions of a place, but also about redeeming them from inhuman elements. In this process, the community continually strives to assimilate the positive aspects of culture. It challenges

oppressive values and systems, while also working to evolve a new cultural pattern based on the Gospel message. This results in a counter-cultural evolution, something new, transformative, and justice-oriented. This process liberates people. It is important to note that this process requires a synodal approach, where unity and cooperation are key. As Peter Phan aptly puts it, “...Christian mission cannot be done except as inculturation, just as divine salvation cannot be achieved except as incarnation.”<sup>25</sup> [2] In the context of interculturalization, this process is called interculturalization. It does not focus on one particular culture, but on various cultures; this interculturalization is also counter-cultural, where something new is emerging. This process is slow, and it demands more tolerance as well as assertiveness.

When the transformation of culture happens, there is a richness of life with an orientation toward justice; human respect overwhelms more than mere rituals, and inhuman and undignified customs are avoided, paving the way for inclusiveness, respect, and dignity. This transformative process has been part of the *Anthropos* tradition; from its research, literature, and suggestions, many seeds have been sown. This has helped our missions and the church. Unless the grassroots missionaries are inspired by this tradition or understand cultural nuances and the richness of mission, we might lose the way of genuinely growing as missionaries.

Indeed, the process of inculturation and interculturalization is not easy, but it is of utmost significance. Every missionary and every mission approach must adopt this process, and it must be continuous. When it becomes an integral part of our lifestyle, thinking pattern, or way of life, we will see success. Every ministry must have a specific methodology on how to incorporate cultural elements in its work. Cultural expression is life, and this is our mission approach. Each province/country can have a committee of experts for inculturation / interculturalization which can assist the PRMs in transforming cultures. This continuous adoption of the process is a testament to our commitment and dedication to our mission.

<sup>23</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 488.

<sup>24</sup> Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.

<sup>25</sup> Peter C. Phan, “Mission as Inculturation: Contextualizing god’s Message in Local Cultures,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies*, 433.

## 2.5. Embrace Radical Compassion: Restorative Justice and Environmental Concerns

The mission of Jesus was compassion in its fullness. Compassion is another name for Jesus because his words and actions expressed compassion to the people. The poor, the marginalized, the excluded, and the unwanted in society were at the center of Jesus' mission. He encountered lepers (Lk 17:11-19), the blind (Mt 12:22), the dumb (Mt 9:32-33), suffering women (Lk 8:43-48), and socially excluded people (Mk 9:14-21, Mk 16:9). He healed them and gave them dignity and showed them God loves them and is on the side of the victim. This is the center of biblical revelation. Jesus' life was compassion; it was radical compassion, challenging religious and cultural traditions, and the common understating of love. Jesus showed what is true love – radical compassion.

Compassion means more than feeling pity; it means acting in solidarity, understanding the struggles of the marginalized, and standing with them in their pursuit of justice and dignity. Compassion is not passive. It calls for active involvement in the fight against structures of oppression. Radical compassion means challenging systems of injustice, economic inequality, and environmental degradation. Leonard Boff's concept of radical compassion is deeply tied to the preferential option for the poor, which is central to Liberation Theology.<sup>26</sup> Pope Francis reminds us that mission is to everyone, "but above all the poor and the sick, those who are usually despised and overlooked." (EG 48). Serving them demands being "bruised, hurting and dirty," and "to be out on the streets," to go out to the periphery rather than remaining "at the center" (EG 49). In this service to humanity, one notices a lot of violence against the poor and excluded in society. "Every violation of personal dignity of the human being cries out in vengeance to God and is an offense against the creator of the individual" (*Christifideles Laici* 461, EG 213). Therefore, being charitable and reaching out to the poor is our mission approach; but the injustice faced by people experiencing poverty cannot be put under the carpet. Going beyond

the charity syndrome<sup>27</sup> and restoring justice is integral to mission. In this context, reconciliation is a pathway, but not at the cost of restoring justice to the victims. "As followers of the prophetic Christ, we seek justice; as followers of the self-emptying Christ, we seek reconciliation. Our efforts to pursue justice must take place and find direction through our efforts to pursue reconciliation."<sup>28</sup> Here, one can stress restorative justice over retributive justice, which focuses on healing and repairing the harm caused by injustice, rather than punishment.

Over the years, our Society has pursued service for the poor in all the PRMs. Several initiatives have been taken to reach migrants, refugees, marginalized, excluded, and so forth. The future is going beyond the charity syndrome. Showing radical compassion with concrete long-term goals will transform the situation. Showing "love and communion presupposes otherness: otherness of persons, cultures, religions, context."<sup>29</sup> Encompassing a holistic approach with radical compassion is imperative, including empowering women in our society. This is not the mission of women congregations alone.

The world has experienced changes in nature, climate, and the surrounding environment. People are affected, the poor have become vulnerable, and eco-justice is ringing in our ears. Leonard Boff's ideas of ecological and social justice highlight compassion toward the poor and creation itself.<sup>30</sup> [5] He brings forward the idea of interconnectedness and responsibility for humanity and the earth. Pope Francis is loud and clear in his teachings (*Laudato Si* and *Laudato Deum*). There is the cry of nature and the cry of the poor. Thus, there is an urgent imperative to work for the integrity of creation (cf. *Laudato Si* 164-201).

---

<sup>27</sup> Stanislaus, "Mission Intergentes: The Role of Consecrated Persons" in *Prospects and Pathways in India: Missio Ad- Inter Gentes*, Mumabi: St. Pauls, 2019, 80.

<sup>28</sup> *Conclusions of the Ishvani Kendra Silver Jubilee Colloquium*, "The Church in Mission: Universal Mandate and Local Concerns," Ishvani Kendra, Pune, 24-27 October 2001, no.17

<sup>29</sup> Jacob Kavunkal, "Mission – an Epiphany of Love and Service," in *Mission Beyond Ad Gentes*, Jacob Kavunkal and Christian Tauchner, ed., Siegburg: Franz Schmitt Verlag, 2016, 237.

<sup>30</sup> Leonard Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, New York, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002.

---

<sup>26</sup> Leonard Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, New York, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987

We have taken many initiatives on environmental concerns, but are they enough? Do we all take our lifestyle and mission seriously? Are our steps sufficient and are they part of a goal-oriented strategy? The answers will determine our future mission.

## 2.6. Significance of Pastoral Work and What Else?

The church carries out her activities in various ways, specially through pastoral care. Pope John Paul II said, “the boundaries between pastoral care of the faithful, new evangelization and specific missionary activity are not clearly definable, and it is unthinkable to create barriers between them or to put them into watertight compartments.” (RM 34). Pope Francis moves beyond new evangelization; his stress is on the missionary activities of the church that can attract people to God, witness to the faith as humble servants and reach out to people especially on the peripheries.

The Society is very much engaged in pastoral activities. Over the years, more requests are coming to take over parishes, and we are helping the local church assuming more parishes; thus, more are involved in pastoral work. As of 2024, we are working in 981 parishes, involving 1626 confreres. Taking only confreres who are active in ministries in the whole Society, 47.3% are involved in parish works. Every year, there seems to be an increase of confreres involved in the parish work.

SVD's in the Parishes				
	2018		2024	
Zones	Parishes	Confreres in Parishes	Parishes	Confreres in Parishes
AFRAM	110	230	122	227
ASPAC	332	597	384	603
EUROPA	153	214	159	269
PANAM	285	439	316	527
<b>Total</b>	<b>880</b>	<b>1480</b>	<b>981</b>	<b>1626</b>

There is a tendency to get fully involved in pastoral work in the parishes and neglect the primary vocation of being missionary. Divine Word Missionaries have a missionary religious vocation. This vocation can also be fulfilled in parish work. Evolving missionary pastoral work, as John Paul II stressed, is a way. Even more, making the parishes missionary parishes

or mission centers is the best way to fulfill the contextual needs of the church today. Thus, it is imperative that SVDs develop every parish in their pastoral care into a missionary parish.

## Imperative of developing Missionary Parishes / Mission Centers

In the places where Christians are a minority, John Paul II says, “The Lord entrusts to them (priests) not only the pastoral care of the Christian community but also and above all the evangelization of those of their fellow citizens who do not belong to Christ’s flock.” (RM 67). Thus, he is urging everyone to go beyond pastoral care to reach out to others. Interestingly, he says, “missionary pastoral activity should sense their unity within the communion which characterizes the Mystical Body.” (RM 75). The stress is on missionary pastoral activity, which Pope Francis built on in his pontificate.

Pope Francis has significantly influenced the church’s missionary identity, which is open, inclusive, and engaged in the world's most pressing issues, all while remaining rooted in the Gospel message. His focus on mercy, outreach, and accompaniment has encouraged many within the church to re-evaluate their approaches to ministry, particularly in challenging environments. It has also inspired a renewed commitment to social justice and environmental responsibility within the church. As Francis asserts, quoting Pope Benedict XVI, “We need to move ‘from a pastoral ministry of

mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry.’” (EG 15). Every Christian is a “missionary disciple,” and every parish has to be a missionary parish.

The booklets *Profile of SVD Parish* and *Becoming an SVD Missionary Parish* have enlisted some ways to make a

parish a missionary parish: kerygmatic community, vibrant prayer, and liturgy, social outreach programs, showing solidarity with the marginalized, eco parish programs, celebration of diverse cultures, showing special concerns to family and youth, involving lay partners, celebration of SVD Mission day and SVD feasts



and so forth.<sup>31</sup> More so, the four characteristic dimensions – biblical animation, mission animation, JPIC activities, and communication have to be part of every parish through which people are animated and encouraged to participate in various activities. Thus, missionary pastoral work goes beyond fulfilling the sacramental duties in a parish.

The challenge before us is to collaborate with respective dioceses as well as to keep up the orientation of our Society, making everyone active participants in God's mission. Your cooperation, your collaboration with lay leaders, your proper planning and execution, your common methodology, your common programs in a district, your annual evaluation, etc. would assist us in promoting missionary parishes.

These missionary parishes can gradually become mission centers for SVD future missions. This does not mean shunning pastoral work, but that the primary activities would be missionary engagements with people and nature. The pastoral work would flow from these missionary engagements. Sacraments become meaningful when the missionary engagements are carried out as the primary focus. Thus, they don't become rituals but a power to transform society's inhuman or unjust structures and practices. The question arises as to what areas the SVD could be more concretely involved in in the coming years, beyond everyday pastoral work. What methodology would one use to make the parishes as mission centers?

## 2.7. Direction of Missionary Activities

The Society of the Divine Word has a rich tradition of four dialogue partners, four characteristic dimensions, congregational directions, and more. In this context, mere slogans or classifications may not bring the desired results. "Realities are more important than ideas" (EG 231-233). Therefore, let us focus on the realities of the local place and our own Society. This understanding will guide us in making concrete plans and taking concrete actions. I propose a matrix for the future, a roadmap that will require our collective commitment and action to bring it to fruition.

**Our name is our mission.** Our name gives us an identity,<sup>32</sup> and a call to live this identity. Giving importance to the Word of God and embodying the Word in one's life will create missionary activities. Others call us Divine Word Missionaries only when there are concrete action plans and witness value.

**Prepare Missionaries.** Over the years, we are aware of the importance of formation. We stress initial formation, and we have *the Ratio Formationis Generalis 2024*, a comprehensive guide for the formation of Divine Word Missionaries. This has come out on the eve of our sesquicentennial Jubilee. We have done a long walk, reflecting and forming young people; this has to continue. Along with them, we need to concentrate more on ongoing formation in the coming years. We have talked, discussed, and stressed this a lot. But few things are concretely done. A more emphatic, planned, scientific, and progressive approach to ongoing formation will show how our Society can progress in the future.

**The involvement of lay partners/associates** is not just necessary but a vital component of our mission. Our mission's success, future, and impact can only be fully realized when we work with people. Our collaboration with laypeople makes the mission alive, fruitful, efficacious, and impactful. More collaborative work in many areas of missionary activities can be enriched only with lay people, predominantly lay partners. As one person said in a meeting in Rome at UISG, "The success of a congregation depends on when the lay people own the charism of that congregation and continuously cooperate with it." Therefore, our formation, promotion, and work with SVD lay partners/associates is not just essential but integral to our success today, and the future of our Society depends on how we progress in this aspect. Your role as lay partners/associates is not just important, but it is the very heart of our mission.

Let us **work scientifically/-professionally**. In each PRM, we have a lot of activities, but we could narrow them down and work scientifically with proper study, preparing a personal,

---

<sup>31</sup> *Becoming an SVD Missionary Parish*, Rome: SVD Publications, 2020.

---

<sup>32</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> General Chapter, 37-42.

strategic plan (action plan), and professional approach. Witness to faith needs to be concrete, “witness is a matter of lives and words working together.”<sup>33</sup> God can do miracles in mission, but we must put our efforts into this, using a scientific approach with proper orientations. Decision-making, executing plans, and working together need a professional approach, technical skills, and adequate resources. Let us pursue our task with diligence and professionalism. To work efficiently is evangelical; it bears the desired result (Lk 14: 28-33). Your commitment to a scientific and professional approach is crucial for the success of our mission work.

Today, people need “good missionaries” but “not the good missionaries who are inefficient or dormant” but effective in changing the postmodern world. One parishioner told me, “Our assistant parish priest is good but useless.” He asserted, “Give us good and efficient missionaries.” Today, our approach has to be good but scientific, effective, and concrete.

Let us consider a **corporate mission approach**. By this, I am not referring to a business model in our missions, but rather, I am suggesting that we draw significant direction from the corporate world in preparing ourselves and doing mission. Planning, execution, and evaluation approaches in the corporate world can significantly aid us. Of course, this approach must be infused with spiritual depth and discernment. The synodal approach can assist us in this regard, but we must also take into account the cultural impact or cultural nuances in the synodal approach. This is a challenge we face today. The corporate mission approach in our Society could emphasize unity, shared responsibility, and collective action with lay people to fulfill the mission of spreading the gospel and serving the community. This approach contrasts with more individualistic or personal mission efforts; though they may be good, they do not bear much fruit in the long run.

## 2.8. The Future of Mission in Europe

The Roscommon *Consensus* (1990) changed the perspective of mission in Europe. The realization that *Europe is a mission continent* and various other concerns prompted the

Society to adopt new approaches. The foreign missionaries are invited to continue the *mission*. We have grown more, and all the PRMs in Europe have intercultural communities. The fast changes in the European context have become a significant challenge to the SVD and the whole church. Secularization and dechristianization are in a rapid phase, there are few youths in the church, few are interested in the institutional church, and so forth. These prompt serious reflection, dialogue, and discernment, which are needed to shape the future of mission in Europe. Your serious reflection and collective thinking are crucial for shaping the future of our mission in Europe.

Therefore, what is the face of the SVD mission in Europe? Indeed, we are grateful for the missionaries’ heritage and hard work. But when more and more foreign missionaries come, what is their future? What are the ministries? What mission approach do they need to follow? What do European provinces want to offer to them? How do they need to be prepared? These are some of the questions many are asking. Without knowing the answer to these questions and following the traditional methods of pastoral work, maintaining the past, taking care of old structures, and so forth will not help us in the future.

Having intercultural communities is good and enriching, but some serious collective thinking about our mission in Europe and what we are ready to offer foreign missionaries is urgent today.

## Conclusion

Having seen the past and the future, one can understand that there are many challenges and prospects. But we cannot deal with all of these here. “Mission is a single but complex reality, and it develops in a variety of ways.” (RM 41) These varied ways of doing things must have focus, depth, and consistency. Over the years, the growth of the Society has been witnessed, and the grace of God has always abundantly been there; but now, the responsibility is in the hands of Society to plan intelligently, to execute cleverly, to live diligently, and to motivate others convincingly, showing the spiritual strength and prophetic witness among people.

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/-2021-01/witness-a-resource-from-the-faith-and-order-commission.pdf>

## *Missio Dei* in Today's World

### **Concluding Statement**

The Year 2025 marks the 150<sup>th</sup> founding anniversary of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD). As part of the celebrations to mark this milestone, the SVD organized an International Conference on Mission with the theme, “*Missio Dei* in Today's World: Healing Wounds, Challenged by Postmodernity, Learning from Cultures, Inspired by Religions.” The conference was held on March 27-29, 2025 at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. Both the speakers and the 250 participants came from the Catholic, as well as other Christian churches, representing a broad cross section of the laity, clergy, and consecrated persons from various religious missionary congregations, making the conference a truly ecclesial and ecumenical event. It was heart-warming for the members of the SVD to feel that the entire church was celebrating with us.

After a word of welcome from the SVD Superior General, Fr. Anselmo Ribeiro, his Eminence Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, Pro-Prefect of the Dicastery for the Evangelization of Peoples, opened the conference with an address which highlighted its significance for the emerging synodal church precisely as the church celebrates a Jubilee Year in 2025. Indeed, the conference was an auspicious opportunity for the participants to reflect on the contributions and challenges to the mission of the church today and be renewed in their commitment to proclaim and share the joy of the Gospel. Grateful for the blessings of the conference, we wish to share with our SVD confreres and other missionaries of the wider church the following reflection as the fruit of this event.

### **Principal Themes of the Conference**

The conference was framed within the perspective of the *Missio Dei*—the mission of the Triune God. This perspective expresses Christians' belief that God has been present and active, through the “dance” of the Spirit and Word, at every moment of creation's 13.8 billion-year history. God's creative activity endows every particle with freedom, yet calls creation to conform to the divine dream of

harmony and kinship, works for healing, and offers mercy when creation goes awry and, especially humans, misuse their freedom for their own selfish purposes.

The Triune God thus reveals Godself as a God of dialogue, vulnerability, love, and mercy. There is no time, situation, reality, people, or culture in which the Triune God is not active and present. But especially in the history of the people of Israel and particularly in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Word made flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit, God calls all creation to relationship and friendship. The risen Christ shares his Spirit with his followers and thus shares his mission with them. Therefore, the mission of God has a church. This mission of the church is to be lived out with the same sense of dialogue, vulnerability, love, and mercy with which Christ lived out his own mission.

God's mission is, of course, active beyond the boundaries of the church, and all creation and all peoples are called to share in that mission as they work with God in their own way, contributing to the fulfillment of God's dream of a creation of harmony and kinship. The church, however, is God's particular “sacrament of salvation,” the “sign and instrument” (LG 1) of God's vulnerable, dialogical, loving, and merciful dealing with every particle of creation and every member of humankind.

God's mission, shared by the church, is multifaceted—a “single but complex reality”—in the words of St. John Paul II (RM 41). The conference focused on four of these facets, each of which reveals in a singular way the mission of the Triune God that the church, by God's grace, shares and makes palpable and visible.

**Healing Wounds.** The church makes palpable and visible God's concern for the healing of creation's wounds. Through Jesus' incarnation, God knows the world's and humanity's wounds. By caring for the vulnerable, the sick, the victims of injustice, the earth's wounds due to human neglect and selfishness, the women and men of the church touch “the suffering flesh of Christ” (EG 24). Through recognizing and

embracing their own woundedness, Christians become themselves wounded healers, offering consolation, reconciliation, and wholeness to a wounded world.

**Challenged by Postmodernity.** The church is challenged by postmodernity, a challenge not only limited to the “global north” but also present throughout the world. It boldly yet humbly offers a narrative that does not suppress diversity and identity but cultivates it with a trust in the Spirit of unity-in-diversity. It acknowledges the fact of past and continuing colonial, patriarchal, and racist abuse of power by rich and greedy nations, and acknowledges that it has itself participated in that abuse, even in some of its missionary work. It recognizes the hunger and thirst for spirituality that exists among contemporary women and men and offers its help to deepen their experience of transcendence in their lives. It recognizes the good will and actions of many women and men who are committed to art, social justice, and education, and gladly cooperates with them in their efforts. It strongly opposes any movements that obstruct the flourishing of creation, and any fundamentalisms that build walls that shut out differing opinions or beliefs. It offers a gospel that tears down such walls (See Eph 2:14). In a time in which we are witnessing increased polarization in both the church and the world at large, the church community can offer a space of dialogue and encounter, where people can meet each other to share their ideas, their life stories, and their journeys of and struggles with faith.

**Learning from Cultures.** The church learns from the world’s cultures. It recognizes in them the great treasures that a generous God, through the Spirit, has bestowed in great variety among the world’s nations and peoples. It commits itself to that “honest and patient dialogue” (AG 11) that can reveal those treasures, purify them by the light of the gospel, and see them as resources for challenging and relevant ways of embodying and proclaiming the message and way of Christ. Working for the inculturation of the gospel by faithful attention to the context in which Christians live, and promoting interculturality as a mutual recognition and enrichment, are natural responses to the “logic

of the incarnation” (EG 117).

**Inspired by Religions.** Christians are inspired by other religions, whether religions like Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, or the traditional and folk religions of indigenous peoples the world over. It recognizes that while the world’s religions might be incommensurable, there are nevertheless elements in them all that can be catalysts for deeper understanding of Christians’ own and the other’s faith. There are in every one of the world’s religions “rays of that light that enlighten all women and men” (NA 2), due to the pervading presence of the Spirit. Friendship and collaboration among peoples of other religions is certainly possible, and, in fact, urgently necessary. Therefore, open, mutual interaction and dialogue with other religions constitute an essential part of mission, indeed, a theological imperative in the contemporary world.

### **Implications for Mission**

The implications for mission that we recognize in the following paragraphs are first of all recommended for our SVD confreres throughout the world. We recognize, however, that they could also have significance for the missionary work of other religious congregations, and indeed for Christians in general.

Building on the *Missio Dei* perspective of our life, as communities of missionary disciples, our conference has called us to renew our missionary commitment. That commitment can be continuously deepened by reflection and action in our missionary journey in the spirit of synodality and with the method of prophetic dialogue.

On the one hand, our conference has made us aware that, in the past 150 years, we have achieved a great deal in our SVD tradition of engaging in mission. On the other hand, it has also made us realize that more study and research are required if we are to continue to be faithful to that tradition in the light of what our contemporary world calls us to be. We need both discernment and courage in order to have both the vision and the resources to continue our mission as faithful and creative missionary



disciples. Because of this, we recommend that we recommit ourselves to serious education, research, reflection, and ongoing formation in missiology, theology, the social sciences, and the study of God's Word.

In our personal encounters with individuals of good will, and guided by the Spirit's promptings, we will contribute to the healing of the wounds from which the poor and creation are suffering, and with whom we are in deep solidarity. We are called, therefore, to renew our commitment to one another in community, with our sisters and brothers on the peripheries, and with all of God's creatures on Earth.

Our conference has called us to deepen our understanding of the working of the Spirit in all of creation and follow the lead of the God whom we encounter in the wide variety of cosmic and historical processes. Even though God has taken on flesh in Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:14), the implications of "deep incarnation" are far from fully recognized in all the cultures and religions we encounter in our missionary outreach. We are called to participate in the continuing creational and redeeming work of God. Therefore, we seek to discover the Divine Word's continuing incarnation wherever we go and live. Such an attitude and commitment call us as SVDs in every context to creative and transformative ways of participating in God's vision for creation.

We are grateful for the long-standing Anthropos Tradition of research into cultures, languages, and religions. We must, nevertheless, engage in further work on the concepts and art of inculturation, and the condition of postmodernity. This implies a readiness to question even fundamental assumptions in our theologies regarding revelation and our understanding of the Triune God. "Our name is our mission." Inculturating the gospel must be a high priority for us who are dedicated to the incarnate Word of God. Therefore, SVDs in every country need to find a methodology to seriously engage in inculturation in their particular context.

As SVDs, "interculturality is our DNA." Our respect for peoples of all cultures commits us as well to working for a robust interculturality

among those with whom we live in our SVD communities, as well as those among whom we minister. We acknowledge that such interculturality is not simply about being challenged and enriched by others' cultures, but also by a diversity of gender, generations, and other conditions that can marginalize individuals in contemporary society. Therefore, we commit ourselves to promoting and living interculturality in our communities, parishes, and in our other ministries.

Recognizing the presence of the Spirit everywhere, and in the light of contemporary efforts of developing a synodal church, we are committed to taking on synodal attitudes of listening in dialogue and discernment in the context of any culture and religion we encounter. We are also committed to collaborating with any persons who participate in God's mission regardless of religious status, gender, or faith.

### **Looking Forward...**

In his message to the participants of the 19<sup>th</sup> General Chapter of our Society in 2024, Pope Francis affirmed that "creative missionary activities are born of love for the Word of God; and creativity is born of contemplation and discernment." In the same way, as a result of this conference, we reaffirm our openness to the Word of God, to the signs of the time, and to the inspiration of the Spirit present in our history and in the developments of the world. Through encounter, attentive listening, discernment, and prophetic dialogue, we seek to discover and follow the pathways of God's mission today. With appreciation and gratefulness, we look at our past and venture into the future, committing ourselves to the continuing task of becoming faithful and creative missionary disciples as we witness to the Light from everywhere for everyone.

**(Ref: *SVD International Conference on Mission, Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome*).**

## Application of Ecological Theological Reflection Based on the Biblical Passage Col 1:15-20

### I. The Situation of the Colossians

Most scholars agree that the audience of Colossians lived in a syncretistic milieu. To understand clearly, the section of Col 2:6-23 illustrates that this syncretism was probably a mixture of Jewish ideas, angelic worship, asceticism and Hellenistic speculations about the cosmic powers.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, Colossians were influenced by a philosophy that relied solely on human tradition, and worldly elements rather than on Christ.

“This passage is usually called a hymn, and it certainly has a poetic quality that invites us to read it as a structured and concentrated embodiment of meaning, while its pervasive focus on Jesus Christ makes it almost doxological in character.”<sup>2</sup> This letter belongs to the Deutero-Pauline letters. Many scholars believe that the hymn in Colossians already existed before Paul incorporated it into his letter, making some editorial adaptations in the process.

Most scholars agree that the structure of this hymn is divided into two strophes: (1) verses 15-17 and (2) verses 18-20, dealing respectively with the creation of all things in Christ and the reconciliation of all things in Christ. As scholar Johannes Nissen asserts, the hymn in Colossians 1:15-20 is significant for its focus on cosmic Christology.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, scholar Chandra Han states, “The theme of this particular passage is the supremacy of Christ over all creation and over his body, the church, which is the new creation.”<sup>4</sup>

### II. Exegetical Comments

#### 1) The Cosmic Scope of Creation and Reconciliation

Through the phrases “all creation,” “all things,” especially “all things” is repeated six times, as well as the further characterization of all things as both visible and invisible, the hymn conveys to readers the cosmic breadth of both creation and reconciliation. This means that the scope of reconciliation is as vast as the scope of creation. As Denis Edwards puts it, “Here the cosmic Christ is celebrated as both the source of creation and its goal: all things have been created in Christ and all things are reconciled in him.”<sup>5</sup>

In addition, Universal reconciliation is achieved through the death and resurrection of Jesus, extending not only to humanity but to “all things,” including nature. As Joseph Sittler writes: “These verses sing out their triumphant music between two huge and steady poles – “Christ” and “all things”.<sup>6</sup> Thus, everything in creation including all creatures are created in Christ, sustained in him, and reconciled in him.

Christ is “the firstborn of all creation” in the sense that he precedes all creation. Moreover, he has such an intimate relationship with creation that he holds the status of firstborn over all creatures: “I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth” (Ps 89:27). Additionally, Christ is “the firstborn from the dead” in a distinct sense, as the one who, having risen from the dead, pioneers the resurrection and new creation for all of existence. There is a parallel between his role in creation and his role

---

<sup>1</sup> Johannes Nissen, *New Testament and Mission: historical and Hermeneutical Perspectives*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition. (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 127.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (London: Daton, Longman and Todd, 2010), 150.

<sup>3</sup> Johannes Nissen, *New Testament and Mission*, 130.

<sup>4</sup> Chandra Han, “Christ’s Supremacy: Colossians 1:15-20 and Its Implication in Education,” *Diligentia* Vol. 1, No.1

---

(September 2019), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith: The Change of Heart That Leads to a New Way of living on Earth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 56.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Sittler, *Evocations of Grace: Writing on Ecology, Theology and Ethics* (eds. Steven Bouma Prediger and Peter Bakken; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 39. Quoted in Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 153.

in the new creation, reinforced by the designation “Genesis” or “the beginning”—a term often associated with the inception of creation (Gen 1:1; Ps 102:25; Prov 8:22; John 1:1; Heb 1:10; Rev 3:14).<sup>7</sup> This parallel is further developed in the prepositional phrases: *in him, through him, for/to him*. In other words, God is both the origin and the culmination of all creation. Specifically, Jesus Christ is fully integrated into God’s divine relationship with the world. He participates in God’s role in both creation and reconciliation while also serving as the visible representation and embody of God within creation.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, Denis Eward believes that this hymn reflects the concept of deep incarnation in which Christ is celebrated as the “icon of the invisible God,” as the “firstborn of all creation,” as the one in whom “all things in heaven and on earth were created.” As Denis points out, the meaning of the incarnation, of becoming flesh, is not restricted to humanity, “It includes the whole interconnected world of fleshly life and, in some way, includes the whole universe to which flesh is related and on which it depends.”<sup>9</sup>

## 2) Jesus Christ: The Fullness of God

In the second strophe, it is not simply Jesus who is the icon of the invisible God, but the crucified Jesus. His sacrificial and shameful death illuminates, more than anything else, his significance for all creation. Therefore, the hymn invites us to consider the universal significance of Jesus Christ—the man in whom the fullness of God was pleased to incarnate. Richard Bauckham asserts, “What the first strophe says about the created world concerns its relationship to the man Jesus Christ, because the agent of its creation was the one destined to be, and so already identifiable as, Jesus Christ.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in verse 19, Saint Paul actually proclaims that in Christ alone “all the fullness (Greek: *pleroma*) of God was pleased to dwell.”

What is Paul’s theological insight regarding the term “fullness”? The concept of “fullness” played a significant role in Colossians,

particularly in the context of its critique of syncretism. The citizens of Colossae assumed that God was holy and unapproachable, that people were imprisoned by earthly desires and cut off from God by their physical bodies, and that between God and humanity existed angelic powers, the *pleroma*. These powers were believed to be mediators between God and humanity, necessitating their appeasement through adherence to the law (which, according to tradition, was given by angels) and rigorous ascetic practices. In contrast, Saint Paul argues that the fullness of God is already present in Christ and that it has bodily form. Scholar Patricia M. McDonald exegetes that: “the cosmic ‘fullness’ (*pleroma*) refers to the fullness of God.”<sup>11</sup> That is the reason why, the Colossians have no reason to fear the rulers and powers.

## 3) Christ’s Supremacy Over All Powers and Reconciliation

Christ is the one through whom all things were created and for whom they exist. “Whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers,” he sustains everything and brings about reconciliation. Specifically, the hymn emphasizes that no power in the world exists apart from Christ—everything was created through him, and thus, all things have been reconciled by him and to him. Patricia comments on verse 16: “it is probable that ‘visible and invisible’ and the references to thrones, dominions, rulers, powers are the author’s expansion to cover explicitly the kinds of forces whose influence underlay the writer’s concern for the community.”<sup>12</sup>

## 4) The Gospel centers on Jesus, who is the fulfillment of all creation

Since Christ is the creator of all things, their ultimate purpose is connected to him. Since everything was made for him, he will guide all creation toward its intended fulfillment. This underscores that the Gospel—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—is central,

<sup>7</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 154.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*, 58.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 153.

<sup>11</sup> Patricia M. McDonald, “The Letter to the Colossians,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century*, eds. John J. Collins, Gina Hens-Piazza, Barbara Reid, and Donald Senior (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 1710.

<sup>12</sup> Patricia M. McDonald, “The Letter to the Colossians,” 1709.

culminating, and decisive for all of creation. According to Richard Bauckham: “The whole narrative is thus highly particular in its focus on the story of Jesus Christ and at the same time holistic in its embrace of the whole creation. Any Christian attempt to understand creation as a whole must likewise see all in the light of Jesus Christ and the Gospel story.”<sup>13</sup>

The fulfillment of destined all creation in this hymn also means that Christ’s death and resurrection are the beginning of the transformation of the whole of creation.<sup>14</sup> This idea also resonates in Ephesians chapter 1 verses 9-10, 20-30, where all things will be gathered up in the risen Christ.

### III. Ecological Reflections

#### 1) Christ as the Center and Cosmic Peace of the whole Creation

Firstly, the hymn offers a holistic vision of all creation integrated in Jesus Christ. The prepositional phrases (*in him, through him, for him*) emphasize relationality. Just as all creatures are interconnected, they are also intimately connected to Jesus Christ. He is their goal in the sense that this relationship to Christ is what will in the end constitute the peace of the whole creation.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, to perceive creation in its entirety, we must see it in relation to the crucified and risen Jesus. Contextualizing this approach for the contemporary world, theologian Jürgen Moltmann asserts: “Today a cosmic Christology has to confront Christ the redeemer with a nature which human beings have plunged into chaos, infected with poisonous waste and condemned to universal death; for it is only this Christ who can save men and women from their despair and preserve nature from annihilation.”<sup>16</sup>

#### 2) Jesus Christ: Reconciler and Renewal of All Things

Secondly, in today context, Jesus Christ is compared to the world as the one who, through his cross, reconciles all things and, through his

resurrection (as “the firstborn from the dead”), renews everything. In this regard, to understand creation as a whole interconnected world, we must see it in relation to the crucified and risen Jesus, who is the Reconciler and Renewal of all things not only restricted to humanity. Reconciler and Renewal of All Things through incarnation that evokes us to a deeper appropriation of the meaning of God-with-us in Christ. In the concept of deep incarnation, Denis says, “the Christ-event can be understood as God entering into the evolutionary history of life on Earth, embracing finite creaturely existence from within.” This perspective raises further questions about the theological connection between Christ and evolutionary history, calling us to ongoing discovery.

#### 3) Violence, Evolution, and the Struggle for Harmony

Thirdly, only from the creation itself alone, it cannot be said that its destiny is peaceful and the path to that peace must be through the absence of violence and just only self-sacrificing love.<sup>17</sup> From a positive perspective, modern science—particularly Darwin’s theory of evolution—has revealed a dynamic and ongoing process in which violence is an inevitable aspect of existence. Thomas Berry comments theory of evolution of Darwin following: “Life emerges and advances by the struggle of species for more complete life expression. Humans have made their way amid the harshness of the natural world and have imposed their violence on the natural world. Among themselves humans have experienced unending conflict.”<sup>18</sup> In response to this, Pope Francis call for a recover serene harmony with creation, “An integral ecology includes taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us, whose presence ‘must not be contrived but found, uncovered’.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 156.

<sup>14</sup> Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*, 57.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>16</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (trans. Margaret Kohl; London: SCM Press, 1990), 275. Quoted in Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 158.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 158.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1988), 216–217. Quoted in Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 159.

<sup>19</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 225.



#### **4) Christ's Victory Over Hostile Powers and the Call to Action**

Lastly, the hostility and violence present in the world today parallel the challenges faced by the Colossian community, particularly concerning “the powers”—whether political, social, or spiritual. These forces remain tangible today in the form of natural disasters, illness, pandemics, and oppressive political and social structures. Whatever hostile powers may exist, in heaven or on earth, Christ has pacified them. Through his death and resurrection, he inaugurated the peace that creation was originally intended to embody. Notably, Christ's pacification of these powers takes effect through humanity, as people actively work toward peace between themselves and the rest of creation. Applying this insight, individuals are called to engage with contemporary challenges, including pollution, climate change, water scarcity, biodiversity loss, and global inequality.<sup>20</sup>

#### **IV. Implications of Eco-Theological Reflections on Col 1:15-20**

In short, the hymn contributes to Eco-theological interpretation which is relevant in today's religious and cultural situation. God's economy of salvation reaches out far beyond that world of Christians, even beyond the human world, that mean include all creatures.

##### **1) Ecological conversion ground on Christocentric salvation**

Theologian M. Barth rightly criticizes a tendency in biblical scholarship to reduce salvation to only human sphere.<sup>21</sup> Christ is the Lord of the universe, not only of humans but of all creatures. Salvation operates not only at the level of individual redemption but also in terms of social solidarity, addressing the broken interconnectedness between humanity and nature. Therefore, a paradigm shift is necessary for theological approaches—one that includes ecological conversion at both individual and communal levels, ecological pastoral care, and Christian ecological education. Above all, these shifts must remain rooted in Christocentricity.

<sup>20</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, Chapter One: What is Happening to Our Common Home.

<sup>21</sup> Barth M., “Christ and All things,” in Johannes Nissen, *New Testament and Mission*, 136.

#### **2) Theology of Reconciliation: Embracing Nature in God's Mission**

Opening for vision of theology of reconciliation that include nature. Johannes Nissen says that “theology of reconciliation which is of great significance for today's mission.” This theological paradigm can be discerned on three levels: (1) a Christological level, in which Christ is the mediator through whom God reconciles the world to Himself; (2) an ecclesiological level, in which Christ reconciles Jews and Gentiles; and (3) a cosmic level, in which Christ reconciles all powers in heaven and on earth.<sup>22</sup> From this perspective, eco-theology promotes theological studies that not only focus on the role of nature in God's creation and salvation but also research the threefold harmonious relationship between God, humanity, and nature.

##### **3) Approaching Ecological conversion from Christian education**

The concept of the pre-existent Christ affirms that His presence precedes all things. This signifies that Christ is not a created being but is equal to God, making Him the foundation of everything. If Christian education seeks to uncover God's truth, it must begin with Christ, who is both the center and the firm foundation of Christian education. Replacing Christ with mere human morality would diminish the purpose of Christian education, shifting its focus away from knowing God through Christ. Moreover, Christian education—particularly catechesis—must remain connected to the role of nature in God's plan of salvation. As Pope Francis teaches: “The ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which has already been attained by the risen Christ, the measure of the maturity of all things.”<sup>23</sup>

##### **4) Mission to “foreign” structures**

Scholar Ukpong opines that the “powers” in the New Testament letters can have various meanings instead of seeing as intrinsically evil.<sup>24</sup> According to Nissen, the word translated

<sup>22</sup> Johannes Nissen, *New Testament and Mission*, 137.

<sup>23</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 83a.

<sup>24</sup> Ukpong, J. S., “Pluralism and the Problem of the Discernment of Spirits,” *Ecumenical Review* 41:416-425, See in Johannes Nissen, *New Testament and Mission*, 139.

“subsist” (NRSV: “hold together”) in verse 17 has the same roots the modern word “system”. Thus, it can be said that in Christ everything “systematizes,” everything holds together.<sup>25</sup> And Nissen proposes that this observation invites a reflection on the parallel between the ancient concept of “powers” and modern societal structures. These structures include religious frameworks that underpin stable societies, moral structures embedded in customs and cultures, and, importantly, environmental and ecological systems that maintain balance in nature and sustain biodiversity. These are areas where the Church must actively engage, addressing new and peripheral challenges in the contemporary world as “foreign” structures.

## V. Eco-Theological Implications on Reflections Drawing from Col 1:15-20

Ecological conversion and reconciliation are deeply connected in Christocentric salvation (Cosmic Christ), emphasizing that salvation is not just for humanity but for all creation. As the Lord of the universe, the Christ (risen Christ) calls for healing the broken relationship between humanity and nature. This requires a shift in theology—one that embraces ecological pastoral care, catechism focused on ecological awareness, and Christian education rooted in Christ. As Pope Francis reminds us, since the fullness of creation is already realized in the risen Christ: “The ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which has already been attained by the risen Christ, the measure of the maturity of all things.” (*Laudato Si*, 83) Thus making ecological conversion an essential part of Christian faith journey: “[ecological conversion] whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them.” (LS 217)

Reconciliation in Christ restores harmony at every level—between God and humanity, among people, and within creation itself. Eco-theology highlights this by showing that salvation isn’t just about individuals but about the whole world being brought back into balance. Recognizing nature’s role in God’s redemptive plan, the Church must promote holistic ecological education, teaching that

caring for creation is part of our mission of reconciliation.

In order to fully embrace this calling, the Church must engage with social, moral, and environmental structures that shape our world. These systems are not separate from faith but are part of Christ’s sustaining and redeeming work. By addressing today’s ecological challenges with justice, ethical stewardship, and holistic education, the Church fulfills its mission of reconciliation—bringing healing to humanity, nature, and the entire creation.

Reconciliation in Christ evokes the terms recycling, reuse, renewal, and re-establishment. Meanwhile, and salvation in Christ evokes the rediscovery Christ in the midst of Nature, through encounters with people, discovering that the natural energy is from God. In general, each person, each parish community, and school is invited to become an ambassador of Christ to reconcile the relationship between people, nature, and God.

The aim of this section is to develop the ideas drawn from the theme “Cosmic Christ – Reconciliation and salvation for whole creation” that draw from biblical and theological reflection on passage Colossians 1:15-20. These ideas that need to be implemented with more concrete programmatic directions, or at least applied in the context of not only the environmental crisis but also the crisis in the relationship between humans and creation as well as with the Creator. The project as an approach and suggestion for mission of the church, specifically this theme will emphasize the area of holistic ecological education and put that idea into practice with a model. As the command for all Christians in *Laudato Si* evokes: “all creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things. Human beings, endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn by the fullness of Christ, are called to lead all creatures back to their Creator.” (LS 83) specifically, in this section the way of holistic ecological education as a approach for mission of the Church.

<sup>25</sup> Johannes Nissen, *New Testament and Mission*, 139.

## **VI. Missionary Orientation for Ecological Education: Training Environmental Peacemakers**

### **Setting goal for Ecological Education:**

Ecological Education is about re-thinking and re-designing curricular and institutional reform in the spirit of integral ecology in order to foster ecological awareness and transformative action.<sup>26</sup>

#### **1) Ecological Education needs ecological spirituality**

Base on the principle of all creatures are interconnected. Thus, it is necessary a kind of ecological spirituality of solidarity or another name might be called as spirituality of accompaniment in terms not just spiritual counselling but broader to possess the sense of belong to web of life. Ecological spirituality must become a way of life for the eco-peacemakers of reconciliation, whose primary target learners are children and young people.

#### **2) Spirituality of accompaniment in education and transformation**

As Encyclical *Populorum Progressio* On the Development of Peoples on March 26, 1967, Pope Paul VI teaches: “An ever more effective world solidarity should allow all peoples to become the artisans of their destiny.” (PP 65). And *Laudato Si'* highlights on humans as beings of “the ability to work together in building our common home.” (LS 13)

In conclusion of *the second world meeting of popular movements* in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, July 2015, Pope Francis affirms that: “the future of humanity does not lie solely in the hands of great leaders, the great powers and the elites. It is fundamentally in the hands of peoples and in their ability to organize. It is in their hands, which can guide with humility and conviction this process of change. I am with you.”<sup>27</sup> In this vein, Séverine Deneulin explains that

‘Accompaniment’ is the term that has been used within the work of Catholic organizations, and other faith-based organizations, to describe this ‘I am with you’, as an expression of solidarity with the lives of the marginalized.<sup>28</sup> Accompaniment actually is instead of doing something for the marginalized, is to being with them and sharing with them by simply being present to them such as visiting them in their homes, and sharing their commitment to be artisans of their destiny through the organizations that they form.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, accompanying with them as they are as agents of structural change, sometimes at the cost of their lives.

The effect of accompaniment is not only to increase the efficiency of work, but also to be a concrete manifestation of the spirit of solidarity. Psychologically, the accompaniment of church leaders with all Christians or of Christians and non-Christians helps to create trust and opens the way for religious dialogue, social dialogue, and spiritual support. Moreover, the eco-peacemakers must be experienced in accompaniment from family, teachers, parish; then they will become companions for their friends, their families, and for those threatened by the environmental crisis.

#### **3) Spirituality of accompaniment need to attach ecological spirituality (Eco-Spirituality)**

Eschatological character in **ecological spirituality (Eco-spirituality)** that is founded ultimately on the eschatological destiny of all creation to be recapitulated in Christ. God is the eschatological point of arrival of all creatures: “All creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things” (LS 83)

Catechism should emphasize and add this eschatology in curriculum: It is important to remember that it is the whole creation, the entire physical universe, and not just humanity alone that is destined to be redeemed and transformed

<sup>26</sup> See <https://laudatosiactionplatform.org/laudato-si-goals/> (accessed March 18, 2025)

<sup>27</sup> Francis, *Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis To Ecuador, Bolivia And Paraguay (5-13 July 2015): Participation at The Second World Meeting of Popular Movements* [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150709\\_bolivia-movimenti-popolari.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco_20150709_bolivia-movimenti-popolari.html) (accessed on March 22, 2025).

<sup>28</sup> See Séverine Deneulin, *Human Development and The Catholic Social Tradition: Towards an Integral Ecology* (Routledge: New York, 2021), 84.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 85.

in Christ.<sup>30</sup> Since “Jesus says: ‘I make all things new’ (*Rev* 21:5). Eternal life will be a shared experience of awe, in which each creature, resplendently transfigured, will take its rightful place and have something to give those poor men and women who will have been liberated once and for all.” (LS 243)

#### 4) The vision of education for the Transition

The ecological and social transform demands community education that innovative methods to both formal learning and lifelong civic engagement education. The comprehensive viewpoint given in this guide supports an education that enables each individual choose their own path for participate in and contribute to common goods. It identifies in six different pedagogical and competency axes: (1) Systems thinking (*Oikos*), (2) Ethics and responsibility (*Ethos*), (3) Changing mental models (*Nomos*), (4) Shared images and narratives (*Logos*), (5) Collective learning and action (*Praxis*), and (6) Sense of self and connection to others (*Dunamis*).<sup>31</sup>

Some Suggestions and oriented implications in Catholic education and Catechism which these orientations help train soft and hard skills for behavior, action, and for thinking as well:

- (1) Systems Thinking– Teach about the interconnectedness of the whole creation through biblical stewardship and ecological projects.
- (2) Ethics and Responsibility– Instill moral responsibility for the environment by integrating *Laudato Si'* and sustainable practices into catechism.
- (3) Changing Mental Models– strengthening critical mindset on materialism and promote ecological conversion through retreats and lifestyle changes.
- (4) Shared Images and Narratives– Use biblical stories, saints' lives, and creative expression to inspire the spirit of taking care for creation.

<sup>30</sup> See Joshtrom Isaac Kureethadam, *Creation in Crisis: Science, Ethics, Theology* (New York: Orbis, 2014), 324 – 25.

<sup>31</sup> See Renouard, Cécile, Beau, Rémi, Goupil, Christophe and Koenig, Christian, Eds. *The Great Transition Guide: Principles for a Transformative Education* (Campion Hall, Oxford: Forges and Laudato Si' Research Institute, 2021), 108.

- (5) Collective Learning and Action– Encourage hands-on ecological initiatives like eco-clubs, service projects, and advocacy for nature.
- (6) Sense of Self and Connection to others– Foster a deep spiritual and communal identity through prayer, reflection, and environmental leadership.

#### 5) Ecological spirituality towards “change in lifestyle”

In front of the collapse of our common home and the declining state of social relationships, “we are faced with an educational challenge” (LS 209) such as throw-away culture and excessive consumerist culture. Therefore, the way of education is the road that will lead everybody, especially young generation, to become responsible citizens of our earth. Education in general or educational activities are mainly aimed at raising awareness in students. Education not only brings knowledge to people about the living environment around them but above all, it also educates about environmental ethics, from awareness to creating a sense of responsibility in students.

Theoretical education needs to go hand in hand with vivid visual principles, especially for children and young people. Theoretical education is meaningless if it does not help children practice changing their lifestyle and holistic ecological thinking. As Pope Francis calls for a radical “change in lifestyle” which “could bring healthy pressure to bear on those who wield political, economic and social power. .... ‘The issue of environmental degradation challenges us to examine our lifestyle’.” (LS 206) According to Pope Francis, “There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational program, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm.” (LS 111)

### VII. Proposing a Model of Holistic Ecological Education

#### 1) Inspired by Pope Francis' proposal

Pope proposes a model of holistic ecological education, which is supposed to result in integral ecological. This approach, as he describes it, has the capacity to re-establish



harmony between man and nature, God and his fellow human beings: “It [holistic ecological education] seeks also to restore the various levels of ecological equilibrium, establishing harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God.” (LS 210) This educational model requires three elements: responsibility, synodality, and religious sensitivity.

**First**, holistic education towards a kind of curriculum that educates learners to become responsible members of society. Therefore, holistic ecological education as model or approach not neglect fundamental and realistic steps toward caring for the natural environment: “Education in environmental responsibility can encourage ways of acting which directly and significantly affect the world around us, such as avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights, or any number of other practices.” (LS 211)

**Second**, holistic ecological education lead to a greater sense of solidarity within human family: “It [holistic ecological education] needs educators capable of developing an ethics of ecology, and helping people, through effective pedagogy, to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care.” (LS 210) holistic model help cultivate for the pupils the sense of solidarity not only among human fellows but also with all creatures.

**Third**, it is very important element that Education toward sustainability needs to be anchored in a profound **religious sense of God’s goodness** and his loving presence in evolutionary process of the natural world and in human history. Since the earthly Jesus, risen and glorious, is “present throughout creation by his universal Lordship.” (Col 1:19-20) Thus, students need to be educated in a balanced way in terms of social sciences and religious feelings. From there, learners will have a multidimensional and comprehensive view of the world and life.

## 2) Implementation for Holistic Ecological Education

In order to implement the settings for holistic ecological education, it is not lacking the role of family. Schools, media, catechism, and religious formation institutions can all serve as settings that strengthen or expand ecological knowledge and sensitivity because of the family’s essential role in education.

Highlighting the role of family in such ecological education, Pope Francis teaches: “in the family we first learn how to show love and respect for life; we are taught the proper use of things, order and cleanliness, respect for the local ecosystem and care for all creatures. In the family we receive an integral education, which enables us to grow harmoniously in personal maturity.” (LS 213)

The context of ecological education, Pope Francis sets a goal for this: “It is my hope that our seminaries and houses of formation will provide an education in responsible simplicity of life, in grateful contemplation of God’s world, and in concern for the needs of the poor and the protection of the environment.” (LS 214) Implementation for holistic ecological education is not only aimed at the present stage but above all looks to the future, so this approach focuses on training groups of children and youth activists.

## 3) Create and Promote for Ecological Spaces of Encounters

Pope Francis propose a model of encounter that so-called the culture of encounter: “To speak of a “culture of encounter” means that we, as a people, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone. This becomes an aspiration and a style of life.” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 216)

External encounter at the level of encounter begins from the social and cultural aspect, gradually moving towards interculturality in post-modern context especially in context of cities. External encounter creates mutual trust that it will move towards internal encounter, together encountering the Creator, moving towards a reconciling encounter with God as Creator, of whom Christ is the mediator and reconciler. As **Amartya Sen** explains that, it

needs to form a culture of listening and of attentiveness to what happens to the lives of others and to the lives of ecosystems.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the ministry of the church is an instrument to create and promote for ecological spaces of encounter. The ecological space of encounter is not only for individuals, groups, and families, but also for individuals to immerse themselves in living nature, and to reconnect spiritually with the Creator. In the Asian context, especially the Church in Vietnam, the influence of the clergy and religious is respective in society. That is an advantage for them to influence the community for the younger generations. Furthermore, the clergies and religious people not only care about the Catholics but also create environmental programs that can collaborate with inter-religious friends, to build fraternity through working together to protect the environment and build a green community for everyone.

### **VIII. Apply a Model of Renewable Agricultural Farm**

This kind of model not only for parishes or religious orders in suburban or rural areas but for benefits of urban parishes and schools.

#### **1) Explaining on the model of Renewable agricultural farm**

Children and youth who are attracted by gadgets are less likely to play outside. This causes not just a loss of connection with nature, but also direct health problems.

Parishes and religious schools do not have available ecological land space but have a budget of resources (financial, and social relationship). Meanwhile, parishes in the rural areas have ecological land space to create but lack finance and the ability to consume vast agricultural products. Therefore, based on these two needs, this model can be a space and a bridge for parishes and schools to collaborate to solve the problems: (1) consumption sources for agricultural products, (2) providing educational space for children and young people, and (3)

spending the financial resources for investment in ecological technology and agriculture.

#### **2) Setting up goals for this model- Renewable Energy+ Biodiversity Energy+ Education (RBE)**

##### **First goal: Renewable Energy**

It comes from natural energy such as solar panel, wind energy, water (hydroelectric machine). The electricity is sold or using electricity for supplying farm itself.

##### **Second goal: Biodiversity Energy (decomposition from waste)**

Utilize organic waste from leaves, green waste, food, and organic fertilizer to produce bio-fertilizer. This is a reusable organic fertilizer source and does not waste bio-waste, saving costs for crops and farm animals.

##### **Third goal: Education for youth and children<sup>33</sup> through community Engagement**

RBE aims to use its unique offer to engage kids in a dynamic program of education (both formal and informal) and to demonstrate how a renewable agricultural farm contributes to their life. For example, how their smart phones are charged, how a power plant works, how solar, wind, or water energy is transformed into the grid, how photosynthesis captures sunlight, and how biodiversity energy is transformed through the food chain to the well-deserved lunch.

<sup>32</sup> See Amartya Sen, "Listening as Governance," *Indian Express*, 8 April 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/-opinion/columns/coronavirus-india-lockdown-amartya-sen-economy-migrants-6352132/> (accessed on March 22, 2025).

<sup>33</sup> Initiated by researchers David Gazdag and Guy Parker in program entitled *Wild Power, Biodiversity and Solar Farms: A Business Model to Encourage Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation at Scale*, See in 398-399.



### 3) Example for RBE community and training Programs

Activity		Description
Ecology Team Building		<p>Community participants such as local farmers and cooperated customers in business work with ecologists, chaplain to study and improve the RBE.</p> <p>Parish priests and pastoral council members work with farmers, schools, environmental experts and local businesses to specify suitable locations, models, scales, and fund-raising.</p>
Creative Programs		<p>Children or the youth in the school will participate in designing some recycled items, decorating, volunteering to promote the use of solar or wind powered devices as part of the RBE challenge event.</p>

Educational Visits		<p>School children or the youth will visit a clean power and learn how renewable energy is generated, supporting their science learning and encouraging them to be thoughtful consumers.</p> <p>They will study the biodiversity of the site and follow this up with workshops in class. They also have chances to engage experiences as farmers These activities are designed to fit into the Curriculum.</p>
Touring day		<p>Teachers, and student are invited to tour at farm, learn how energy is generated, return to a local school to share findings and explore ways to use the site in the classroom. Discount for groups of teachers, students, and families...etc</p>
Spiritual Need		<p>Supply the spaces for relax and spiritual reflections, towards to opening for small houses for individuals, groups, and families would to have retreats.</p>

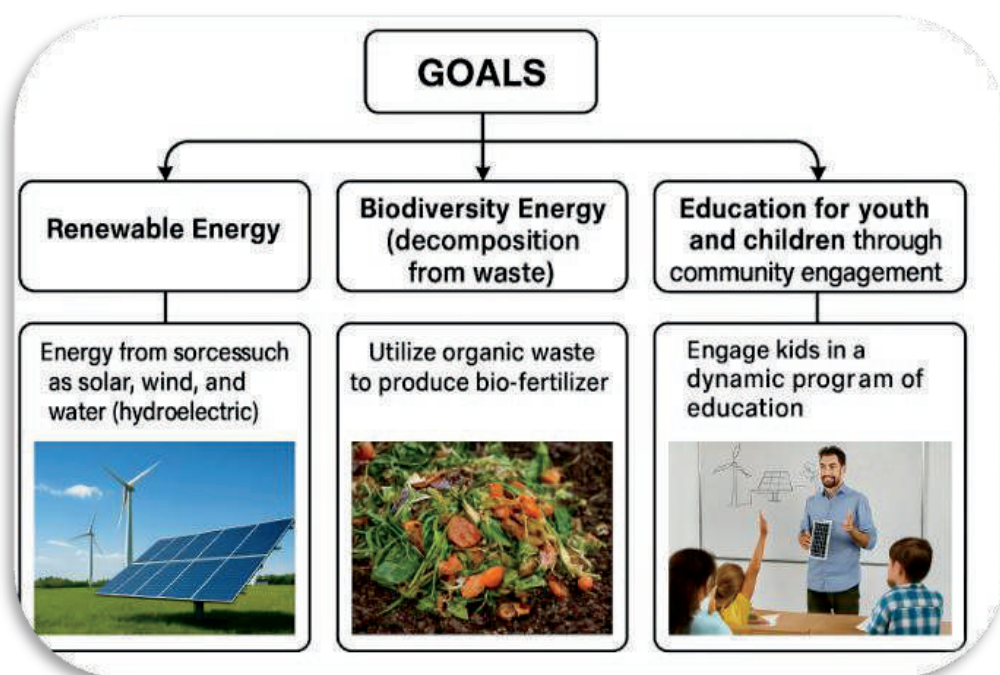
**Fig. 1** RBE engaging with children

RBE has the potential to supply multiple benefits from the land, including the generation of renewable solar energy, improved biodiversity, and the supply of a range of ecosystem services including water/air/soil quality. These benefits not only contribute to climate change mitigation, they also support adaptation both of native biodiversity and agricultural production.

**IX. Conclusion and Applied Contributions**  
**Missionary Orientation for Holistic Ecological Education** as a response to the ecological conversion. Ecological education must be deeply rooted in a spirituality of accompaniment that fosters solidarity and interconnectedness among all living beings. This missionary orientation emphasizes not only knowledge but also an ecological conversion towards a transformative relationship with creation that inspired by the belief that all creatures share a common destiny in the cosmic Christ. Through spiritual accompaniment, educators and religious communities walk alongside learners, fostering trust, social dialogue, and a commitment to justice. By standing with marginalized communities and embracing ecological responsibility, this approach nurtures a sense of belonging within the web of life and empowers individuals to become agents of environmental and social transformation.

**The holistic model of ecological education** inspired by the ideas of Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, the holistic educational model helps people have a multidimensional view of the environment, fostering the awareness that humans are part of a network of ecological diversity, Christians have the mission to awaken awareness of God's presence in creation.

**RBE** is the result of a combination of utilizing renewable energy sources, balancing ecological diversity and educating people. A renewable agricultural farm model provides hands-on ecological education while addressing sustainability challenges. This initiative integrates renewable energy, biodiversity conservation, and educational programs to teach children and communities about ecological responsibility. Through collaboration between urban and rural parishes, this model enhances environmental awareness and fosters sustainable living practices.





James H. Kroeger, M.M.

## Honoring Pope Francis, Welcoming Pope Leo XIV

### Francis, a Vatican II Pope

Our beloved Pope Francis guided the church for just over twelve years (2013-2025), all filled with intense activity. As the 266<sup>th</sup> pope, Francis has garnered many “firsts.” He is the first pope to take the name “Francis” in honor of Saint Francis of Assisi; both shared a special love of the poor and needy. Francis’ first pastoral visit outside of Rome was to the island of Lampedusa, one of the nearest gateways to Europe for Africans fleeing poverty and conflict. He is the first pope coming from the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) and the first pope from the Americas.

Francis, clearly a “people’s pope,” has visited at least 60 states and territories on his international trips, traveling about 255,000 miles. In addition, he is the first pope to visit the Arabian Peninsula, birthplace of Islam. Francis led the church of 1.4 billion (over one-sixth of the world’s population). In his late-2024 visit to Asia, he covered over 20,000 miles (32,000 kilometers). He has canonized over 900 saints, including Mother Teresa of Calcutta and martyred Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero.

**Additional Facts.** Francis has issued a variety of major documents, including four encyclicals: *Lumen Fidei* (2013) [faith], *Laudato Si* (2015) [environment], *Fratelli Tutti* (2020) [social fraternity], and *Dilexit Nos* (2024) [Sacred Heart]. He has published seven apostolic exhortations, the first being *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) [Joy of the Gospel], encouraging us to be active “missionary disciples.” His writings include the 2015 papal bull on mercy, *Misericordiae Vultus*, where he describes Jesus as “mercy made flesh.” He has personally attended three World Youth Days (Brazil, Poland, and Panama). He wisely governed the church during the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Council Affirmation.** However, one remarkable “achievement” which is *not*

included in these many statistics is that during his pontificate, Pope Francis canonized *three* popes: John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II. In the mind of this author, it is significant that all these three “pope-saints” were active participants in Vatican II. Thus, one could validly assert that Pope Francis has not simply canonized three “Vatican II Popes”; *he has also canonized the legacy of the Second Vatican Council.*

Remarkably, Pope Francis is the first pope in six decades who did *not* personally participate in Vatican II. He had his formation during the Council, having entered the Jesuits in 1958, the same year that Pope John XXIII, the “Father of Vatican II,” became pope; he was ordained in 1969, soon after the Council concluded. He has remarkably assimilated the spirit and vision of this marvelous, Spirit-inspired event. With Francis, the Council is almost as alive today as it was sixty years ago when it concluded in 1965. One can identify several core Council themes clearly reflected in the life and teaching of this popular pope.

**Foundational Principles.** First, Vatican II gave attention to *collegiality*, the principle that all bishops, together with the pope, have responsibility for the church. This guideline intends to promote a participatory church, an involved People of God. Francis further expands this vision with his emphasis on *synodality*, which is a readiness to enter into dynamic, respectful, and prayerful speaking, listening, and dialoguing, following the Holy Spirit’s lead. Francis successfully concluded two international gatherings on synodality, involving all members of the church, in 2023 and 2024.

A second Council emphasis focuses on the *local church*. This vision was highlighted in the Council document on missionary activity, *Ad*



*Gentes*. In short, the “center of action” is the local church; this principle extends to liturgy, evangelization, episcopal conferences, leadership, as well as numerous other areas of Christian life. Full, active, conscious participation in church life is both a right and duty of all the baptized; Francis sought to concretize this vision in all local churches around the world.

**Additional Guidelines.** Vatican II emphasized the importance of *dialogue*. This word was introduced into the Council by Paul VI, another Vatican II “saint-pope” in his encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964) [His Church]. This broad principle emphasizes that the church is to

be a community of dialogue, not monologue, a truly listening church, hearing voices from within the church, from other Christians, from people of other faiths, and from the world at large. Francis proved to be a superb example of open-hearted listening!

A fourth principle is captured by the popular expression “servant-leadership.” Again, this vision is applicable to all Christians who seek to aid others in their diverse needs. Even if the actual assistance may be rather small, it is the attitude of sensitive compassion that touches the other person’s heart. Truly, Francis embodied Cardinal Newman’s episcopal motto: *cor ad cor loquitur*, heart speaks to heart.

**Profound Appreciation.** A short article can only present a sampling of pivotal ways that Francis is truly a Vatican II pope; we have only explored four items. However, underlying various specific items is Pope Francis’ profound sensitivity and deep compassion. We all rejoice in heartfelt gratitude for the marvelous gift of *Franciscus*!

-----

## Leo XIV, Missionary Pope

The 267<sup>th</sup> leader of the world’s 1.4 billion Catholics, Pope Leo XIV, has numerous qualities and experiences that equip him to be a true leader and father to Church members and all peoples of faith and good will. Many of these characteristics are already well-known, thanks to extensive media coverage. However, this short piece wishes to focus on one particular significant quality: his “missionary heart.” Let us begin with a little-known, interesting historical fact; it is drawn from this writer’s own lengthy mission experience in the Philippines, the world’s third largest local Church (after Brazil and Mexico).

**Missionary Commitment.** Pope Leo XIV is a member of the Order of Saint Augustine (OSA), founded in 1244. Throughout its history the Augustinians have consistently engaged in

missionary activity. Ferdinand Magellan arrived in the Philippines in 1521, searching for spices and converts for Spanish King Philip II. Magellan was mortally wounded by Lapulapu, a native chieftain. In a second Spanish expedition in 1565, Miguel Lopez de Legaspi returned to the Philippines; significantly, five Augustinians, originating from Spain and Mexico, were also on board.

An organized program of evangelization was thus begun in 1565, spearheaded by the Augustinians. They were followed by Franciscans (1578), Jesuits (1581), Dominicans (1587), and Augustinian Recollects (1606). Augustinian Fray Andres de Urdaneta retrieved a treasured image of the *Santo Niño* (Holy Child Jesus) that had been brought by Magellan. This devotion is one of the largest popular religious

expressions in the country; currently, the new pope's fellow Augustinians care for a minor basilica in Cebu City, the center of this devotion. This unique historical fact confirms that Leo XIV belongs to an order with a deep and profound "missionary heart." In fact, Pope Leo has been to the Philippines a number of times.

**Missionary Heart.** This first Augustinian pope possesses numerous additional qualities that reflect his heart for mission. Leo himself has extensive mission experience, working in Peru for over twenty years. He labored in a remote area, often trudging through the rain and mud to meet the needs of the poor and those on the margins of society. He has also served the Diocese of Chiclayo, a region on the peripheries including 1.3 million people with 83% Catholics that is prone to heavy rains and flooding. Leo was known for his hands-on pastoral care, being deeply involved in social justice and programs of community support. Such experiences result in a deep personal transformation of one's person, of one's heart.

Pope Leo XIV is known as a polyglot. Apart from his native English, he is fluent in Spanish, Italian, French and Portuguese. With his academic background, he would know Latin and German. Presumably, he also learned elements of Quechua, the local language in parts of the Chiclayo region. Missionaries know from direct experience that learning another language is not only a matter of vocabulary and grammar; one begins to imbibe the world-view, values and culture of the local people speaking that language. In addition, often one effectively learns the local language through memorizing and singing local songs. These experiences, with both successes and blunders, transform one's values and one's heart.

**Social Awareness.** Commentators have noted the great significance of the pope's choice of name: Leo, following Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903). He is best remembered for his 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (new realities). This document was written at the time of the industrial revolution, which brought many new challenges to numerous people. It enunciated the rights of workers, the need to fight injustice,

seek just wages, and assist victims of all forms of abuse. This pivotal document set the Church's social teaching on a firm basis. One can realistically expect Leo XIV to both continue and expand this tradition, especially in the areas of social justice and environmental concerns.

Having a "missionary heart" means that one builds upon the foundations and labors of earlier missionaries. Clearly, it is expected that Pope Leo will build upon many of Pope Francis' initiatives and successes. One immediately thinks of synodality, dialogue, bridge-building, gospel joy, care for migrants and refugees, and international travel to visit local churches around the world. Pope Leo prayed at the tomb of Pope Francis on May 10 on his first visit outside the Vatican. Earlier that same day, Leo spoke of Pope Francis, telling the assembled cardinals: "Let us take up this precious legacy and continue on the journey."

**Fostering Unity.** Pope Leo has chosen as his papal motto: *In illo uno unum* (In the one Christ we are one). This choice speaks of his desire for unity in the Church. It also follows the teaching of Saint Augustine and the Augustinians, emphasizing love, harmony, humility and dedication to the spiritual community of the Church. Our new pope is only sixty-nine years old; thus, we hope to enjoy many fruitful years of his leadership, missionary insight, and dedicated pastoral service!



Leo XIV  
8 maggio 2025

**SEDOS RESIDENTIAL SEMINAR at Centro Ad Gentes, Nemi, near Rome**  
**Monday, 16 June – Friday, 20 June 2025**

**“MISSIONARY INSTITUTES AND SYNODALITY:  
CHARISM, PROPHECY AND WITNESS”**

TIME	<b>MONDAY, 16/06/2025 Opening Session</b> (Moderator for the Day: Fr. Alain Mayama, CSSp)
<b>15:00 – 16:00</b>	<b>Arrival</b> – Check in (Registration)
<b>16:00 – 17:00</b>	Coffee / Tea Break
<b>17:00 – 19:00</b>	<b>Opening Prayer:</b> Participants <b>Welcome:</b> Sr. Mary Barron, OLA <b>Introduction to Keynote Speaker:</b> Fr. Alain Mayama, CSSp <b>Keynote Speaker:</b> His Eminence Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle
<b>19:00 – 20:30</b>	Supper
<b>20:30 –</b>	Getting Together
TIME	<b>TUESDAY, 17/06/2025 – CHARISM</b> (Moderator for the Day: Sr. Oyidu Okwori, SHCJ)
<b>07:30 – 08:30</b>	Breakfast
<b>08:30 - 09:30</b>	Prayer – <i>Lectio Divina</i> (in Small Groups)
<b>09:30 – 11:00</b>	Talk: Fr. Fabio Ciardi, OMI
<b>11:00 – 11:30</b>	Break
<b>11:30 – 11:50</b>	Introduction to conversation in the Spirit: Sr. Mary Barron, OLA
<b>11:50 – 12:30</b>	Personal reflection
<b>13:00 – 15:00</b>	Lunch
<b>15:00 – 16:15</b>	Conversation in the Spirit (in Small Groups)
<b>16:15 – 16:45</b>	Break
<b>16:45 – 18:15</b>	Plenary Session/Feedback from the groups
<b>18:30 –</b>	Eucharistic Celebration – in Italian by Fr. Márcio Flávio Martin, CICM



	Supper
<b>TIME</b>	<b>WEDNESDAY, 18/06/2025 – PROPHECY</b> (Moderator for the Day: Fr. Edgardo Guzman, CMF)
<b>07:30 – 08:30</b>	Breakfast
<b>08:30 – 09:30</b>	Prayer – <i>Lectio Divina</i> (in Small Groups)
<b>09:30 – 11:00</b>	Talk: Fr. Márcio Flávio Martin, CICM
<b>11:00 – 11:30</b>	Break
<b>11:30 – 12:30</b>	Personal reflection
<b>13:00 – 15:00</b>	Lunch
<b>15:00 – 16:15</b>	Conversation in the Spirit (in Small Groups)
<b>16:15 – 16:45</b>	Break
<b>16:45 – 18:15</b>	Plenary Session/Feedback from the groups
<b>18:30 –</b>	Eucharistic Celebration – in Spanish by Fr. Edgardo Guzman, CMF
<b>19:30 –</b>	Supper
<b>20:30 –</b>	Cultural Evening
<b>TIME</b>	<b>THURSDAY, 19/06/2025 – WITNESS</b> (Moderator for the Day: Sr. Mary Barron, OLA)
<b>07:30 – 08:30</b>	Breakfast
<b>08:30 – 09:30</b>	Prayer – <i>Lectio Divina</i> (in Small Groups)
<b>09:30 – 11:00</b>	Panel Discussion: Sr. Maria Nirmalini, AC Sr. Joan Agnes Njambi Matimu, MC Fr. Antonio Porcellato, SMA
<b>11:00 – 11:30</b>	Break
<b>11:30 – 12:30</b>	Personal reflection
<b>13:00 – 15:00</b>	Lunch
<b>15:00 – 16:15</b>	Conversation in the Spirit (in Small Groups)

<b>16:15 – 16:45</b>	Break
<b>16:45 – 18:15</b>	Plenary Session/Feedback from the groups
<b>18:30 –</b>	Eucharistic Celebration in French by a Priest Participant
<b>19:30 – 20:30</b>	Supper
<b>20:30 –</b>	Preparation for the evaluation in a creative way – in Groups
<b>TIME</b>	<b>FRIDAY, 20/06/2025</b> (Moderator for the Day: Fr. John Paul, SVD)
<b>07:30 – 08:30</b>	Breakfast
<b>08:30 – 09:00</b>	Prayer – <i>Lectio Divina</i> (in Small Groups)
<b>09:00 – 10:00</b>	Evaluation of the Seminar in Groups
<b>10:00 – 10:30</b>	Break
<b>10:30 – 12:00</b>	Sharing of Evaluation to be presented in a creative way and Summary
<b>12:00 –</b>	Eucharistic Celebration led by SEDOS
<b>13:00 – 15:00</b>	Lunch – Departure.





**SEDOS RESIDENTIAL SEMINAR at  
Centro Ad Gentes, Nemi**

**Monday, 16 June - Friday,  
20 June 2025**

**Theme -  
“Missionary Institutes and  
Synodality  
- Charism, Prophecy and  
Witness”**