

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."¹ 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."² 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."³ 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..."⁴ 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

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

² Arnold Janssen, "The Qualities of a Missionary," in

Arnold Janssen Yesterday and Today, 178.

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

⁴ *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"⁵ (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.⁶ 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

⁵ Ibid., 379.

⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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 12thGC (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.⁹

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.

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

⁸ Friz Brnemann, *A History of Our Society*, 351.

⁹ 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.”¹⁰ When the church is involved in mission, “it does not lend itself to quick-fix strategies. Rather, it challenges us to systematic change.”¹¹ 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 mission¹² 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.

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

¹¹ Ibid, xii.

¹² 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."¹³ 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)'"¹⁴

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

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

¹⁴ *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."¹⁵ 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."¹⁶

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."¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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

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

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

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

Given the world situation, Pope Francis exhorted the 19th GC participants during the Papal Audience, "to be prophetic hope *for every culture*."¹⁹ 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."²⁰ 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*²¹ 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."²² 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.

¹⁹ Pope Francis Message, FTW, 6, 71.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ 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.

²² 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.”²³ 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.²⁴ 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 interculturalism. 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.”²⁵ [2] In the context of interculturalism, this process is called interculturalism. It does not focus on one particular culture, but on various cultures; this interculturalism 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 interculturalism 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 / interculturalism 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.

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

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

²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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 syndrome²⁷ 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.”²⁸ 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.”²⁹ 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.³⁰ [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).

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

²⁸ *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

²⁹ 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.

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

²⁶ 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				
Zones	2018		2024	
	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
Total	880	1480	981	1626

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.³¹ 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,³² 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,

³¹ *Becoming an SVD Missionary Parish*, Rome: SVD Publications, 2020.

³² 19th 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.”³³ 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.

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