



SVD MISSION IN CONTEXTS

**CREATIVE RESPONSES IN
A WOUNDED WORLD**

EDITED BY ANTHONY LE DUC, SVD

MISSION, EDUCATION AND RESEARCH (MER)
SOCIETY OF THE DIVINE WORD, AUSTRALIA PROVINCE

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Mission, Education and Research (MER)
Society of the Divine Word, Australia Province
2025

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Firminus Wiryono, SVD, an Indonesian, was ordained priest on the 10th of October 2015, and sent to SVD Australia Province for his mission appointment. Since 2023 till now, he has been serving as co-formator at SVD seminary, DMC - Box Hill, Vic; director for Overseas Training Program for overseas seminarians; and Vocation Director for Australia Province.

FOREWORD

I am truly honoured to have been asked to write a Foreword for this book, *SVD Mission in Context: Creative Responses in a Wounded World*, celebrating the 150th Jubilee of the Society of the Divine Word.

The book emphasises the Jubilee theme, “*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*,” which embodies a thorough missiological, sociological, and pastoral perspective on the Church’s mission in a diverse and wounded world, extending beyond the jubilee year into a lifelong dedication.

The ongoing conflicts in numerous wartorn regions, the impacts of climate change, economic exploitation, sexual abuse, the exploitation of women and children, and harsh leadership have resulted in immense suffering and need. These shattered lives call upon all people of goodwill to pray, to respond with hope, and to seek a new approach—a fresh way of being Church—towards a renewed humanity. We cannot turn away; instead, we must let their reality resonate with us.

In the Bible, we learn that Jesus chose to share meals with sinners and visit places of misery, exclusion, and suffering—for these were also areas brimming with potential: “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20). “It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick” (Matthew 9:9-13).

We all hold a special affection for the wounded people, despite differences in religious beliefs, social standing, cultural backgrounds, and personal experiences. They are our brothers and sisters, irrespective of race, colour, or creed (Genesis 1:27). In Bangladesh, there are thousands of them in refugee camps, along with many more displaced brothers and sisters in Myanmar. How does a follower of Christ reach out to the grieving widows and fathers in Russia, Ukraine, Israel, and Palestine? How does one bear witness to the Light or “witness to the Kingdom” (Tim Norton, SVD, Ch.5) amidst all these human dramas?

So many individuals have paid the ultimate price of love, coming from everywhere to assist those in pain. These include doctors, nurses, religious figures, priests, volunteers, and individuals of various faiths, as well as atheists, prophets and kings, mothers, fathers, and young people. Whether they were aware of it or not, their decision reflected a universal belief: *love*. “Greater love

has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). This verse, attributed to Jesus, highlights that the act of self-sacrifice or witnessing is not solely a Christian ideal and practice but can emerge from anywhere.

We might wonder why the People’s Republic of China, under the governance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), recently pledged to the World Health Organisation (WHO) with a \$500 million donation over the next five years. Additionally, why does China possess the largest renewable energy sector in the world, indirectly responding to Pope Francis’ appeal to care for creation? In 2020, numerous countries, including Australia, lined the streets to pay tribute to the sacrifices made by COVID-19 frontline workers. Furthermore, the Sikh Golden Temple in India, known for having the world’s largest free kitchen, serves between 50,000 and 100,000 meals daily to those in need, regardless of their background. This embodies the Sikhs’ principle of witnessing to the same divine light they believe resides within all creation.

There are witnesses to God’s reign and saints living among us—non-Catholics, communists, and Sikhs—who convey and grasp the profound concept of love and light, as well as the interconnectedness of all things. This is the message that missionaries share every Sunday: Christ, the Logos made flesh. “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

In reading this book, I am convinced that “witnessing to the Light” transcends geography, culture, and background. It serves as a universal invitation for individuals from all walks of life to unite and support each other—no matter their origins—where everyone can discover hope, purpose, and renewed strength for the challenges that lie ahead (S. Deva Savariyappan, SVD, Ch.17). Therefore, it is no longer just the duty of Christian missionaries; it has become a global mission. The mission is now a collaborative and interdependent effort, where every segment of the global church and secular society plays a role in the art of witnessing to something greater than ourselves. It is both a burden and a gift.

It is also affirmed here that the mission, in its entirety, surpasses the capacity of any single religious order or the Catholic Church, regardless of how well it is managed, to reflect in its practices. “The Christian gospel is not the possession of any person or any group from a particular time or place” (Tim Norton, SVD, Ch.5), and it calls for humility and active contemplation on our part.

This book, filled with well-researched academic essays, personal narratives, and missiological reflections, offers an excellent synthesis of how to effectively witness to the Light and God’s Reign, based on four key

dimensions: Mission Animation, Biblical Apostolate, Communication, and Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC). These dimensions are deemed essential to their mission and guide all their activities.

This book will encourage readers not to overlook the fragility of human nature. Instead, it urges them to “cultivate a spirituality of woundedness,” embrace prophetic dialogue, and engage creatively with diverse cultures and faith traditions (Kasmir Nema, SVD, Ch.14), and to adopt an “expansive moral imagination,” a paradigm of compassion (Anthony Le Duc, SVD, Ch.19) while moving towards a synodal way of being church (Albano Da Costa, SVD, Ch.12).

The practical implications of this book are significant for the life and mission of the Church, as illustrated in the SVD Anthropos Tradition and the renewed emphasis on intercultural formation (Roger Schroder, SVD, Ch. 11 and Stephen Bevans, SVD, Ch.13).

Missio Dei represents the mission of the Blessed Trinity (Antonio M. Pernia, SVD, Ch.7; *Ad Gentes* 1-2.9), and it calls for the genuine, faithful, and dedicated efforts of all of God’s children from every corner of the world through various organizational and communication channels to engage in that same mission for a Church that is inclusive and merciful. The book serves as a reminder that God’s Kingdom resembles a magnificent magnet on the horizon, attracting all the goodness of humanity from everywhere for everyone. “I will draw all people unto me” (John 12:32,33), Jesus proclaims.

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to all contributors who participated in this project. Special thanks go to Anthony Le Duc, SVD for his hard work in editing and publishing the book. May this book highlight the hope that the spirit of Saints Arnold and Joseph, SVD martyrs, along with Blessed Maria and Josepha, will inspire and guide everyone towards a deeper connection with God’s reign, igniting both a gentle, healing, and passionate fire of the Holy Spirit within your community.

Iosefo A. Rass, SVD
Provincial
Australia Province

INTRODUCTION

Anthony Le Duc, SVD

This book project emerged from my role as coordinator of the Mission, Education, and Research (MER) initiative for the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) in the Australia Province. While MER also serves as a broader collaborative platform across the SVD provinces in the Asia-Pacific (ASPAC) Zone, its specific focus in Australia is to foster deeper reflection and scholarly engagement with the Society's missionary charism through activities such as webinars, conferences, and publications.

The celebration of the 150th Jubilee of the Society (1875–2025) offered a timely and meaningful opportunity to advance this goal through two major initiatives, jointly organized by MER and the Province's Jubilee Committee. The first initiative was a series of five online public lectures exploring the Jubilee theme, "*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*," through the lens of the four Characteristic Dimensions of SVD mission: Biblical Apostolate, Mission Animation, Communication, and Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation (JPIC). The fifth lecture examined the Jubilee theme from a synodal perspective and was delivered by Archbishop Mark Benedict Coleridge of the Archdiocese of Brisbane—offering a valuable external viewpoint from outside the SVD.

These lectures brought together confreres and lay partners from across the province and beyond, creating a shared space to reflect on and reimagine the Society's core missionary commitments in today's complex and often wounded world. Several of the contributions in this volume are drawn directly from these public lectures.

The second initiative is the volume you now hold in your hands. *SVD Mission in Contexts: Creative Responses in a Wounded World* gathers a diverse range of contributions that reflect on the Characteristic Dimensions from multiple perspectives—academic, pastoral, theological, and personal. The richness of its content mirrors the varied contexts in which Divine Word Missionaries and their partners live and work today.

The book is organized into two parts. Part One presents essays and reflections directly inspired by the Jubilee theme, “*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*.” These writings engage deeply with the theological and missiological implications of the theme, drawing on biblical insight, ecclesial tradition, intercultural experience, and prophetic imagination. They explore how we, as missionaries and partners in the Arnoldus Family, can be credible witnesses to Christ, the Light, in an age marked by complexity and brokenness.

Part Two offers a wide-ranging collection of essays that, while not all directly linked to the Jubilee theme, address pressing issues and contexts central to MER’s mission concerns and to the broader SVD apostolate. These include topics such as ecology, spiritual accompaniment, interreligious dialogue, indigenous pastoral outreach, intercultural living, and theological formation—each pointing to new ways in which the Word continues to become flesh in our world.

A distinctive strength of this volume is its inclusive and intergenerational scope. While most contributors are SVD members, we are honored to include a reflection by Sr. Herlina Hadia, SSpS—a welcome reminder of the shared mission of the Arnoldus Family. The authors represent a wide spectrum of experience and expertise. Among them are distinguished theologians and missiologists such as Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, whose works have shaped global discussions on mission and culture. The volume also features contributions from two former Superiors General—Antonio M. Pernia and Paulus Budi Kleden, the latter now Archbishop of Ende in Indonesia—as well as Tim Norton, currently Bishop of Broome, Australia.

Additional contributions come from those with experience at the Generalate level, including Lazar T. Stanislaus, Wojciech Szypuła, and Kasmir Nema, whose insights help illuminate the Society’s global vision and evolving priorities. At the same time, emerging voices such as Michael Nguyen, Albano Da Costa, and Clement Baffoe embody the energy of a new generation of missionaries integrating academic formation with pastoral engagement.

Crucially, this volume also gives space to confreres working in concrete missionary contexts—accompanying Indigenous communities, leading parish ministries, nurturing vocations, and developing innovative approaches to ecological and digital mission. Their voices remind us that theology and mission must remain grounded in lived experience and human encounter.

As editor, it is my hope that this book will serve not only as a fitting commemoration of the Society’s 150-year journey, but also as a living testimony to its ongoing commitment to be *from everywhere for everyone*. In a world

increasingly fractured by division, wounded by injustice, and searching for meaning, may these reflections offer light, insight, and inspiration.

May this Jubilee volume strengthen our shared commitment to bearing witness—creatively, faithfully, and contextually—to the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, in our communities and in our common home.

Part One

Perspectives on the Jubilee Theme:

*“Witnessing to the Light:
From Everywhere for Everyone”*

1

A Meditation on the Light to Whom We Witness

Stephen Bevans, SVD

“Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone.” Our first reflection on this week of retreat will be on the Light to Whom we witness. This Light provides the foundation for all we are and do as Divine Word Missionaries. It is a rich, multi-faceted and multi-valent image, and so needs careful and reverent reflection. Because of this our reflection this morning will not be simply a communication of a lot of data or information. It will be a prayerful consideration that will take us deep into the reality of the mission of God in which the church and therefore we SVDs and members of the Arnoldus Family participate—by God’s amazing grace.

The Triune God of light

The Light to which we witness is the Light which is the Triune God.

The “Dark Light” of the Father

This Light is first of all the “dark light”¹ of Holy Mystery, what traditional theology has called the Father. “God is light,” we read in the first letter of John, “and in [God] there is no darkness” (1Jn 1:5), but this divine light is the blinding, “unapproachable” (1Tim 6:16) light of Mystery. As a beautiful, nineteenth century English hymn expresses it:

¹ The inspiration for this phrase is from Elizabeth A. Johnson, the title of Part IV of *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 189.

Great Father of glory, pure Father of light
Thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight.
All laud we world ruler, O help us to see
'tis only the splendor of light hideth thee.

Immortal, invisible, God only wise
In light inaccessible, hid from our eyes.
Most blessed, most glorious, the ancient of days
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.²

The dark light of Mystery, however, is only unapproachable in that we can never fully see, never fully grasp the divine luminosity, the divine beauty. Bernard of Cluny writes:

Nescio, Nescio
Quae jubilatio
Lux tibi quails

I do not know, I do not know
What jubilation
The kind of light that belongs to you.³

John of the Cross writes lyrically of setting for in the “dark night” in search of God, with no light to guide him except the light “in which my heart was burning.”

That light guided me
More surely than the noonday sun
To the place where he was waiting for me.⁴

The paradox of Mystery is that while God is totally beyond our grasp, God is also nearer to us—in St. Augustine’s words—than we are to ourselves.⁵ Rudolf Otto famously speaks of this paradox as the *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. While on the other hand God’s light is too bright, “simultaneously, with the experience of the Holy as beyond and too much, is another sense of fascination, allurements, and seduction, a *being pulled into something very good*

² Walter Chalmers Smith, “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise,” <https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/14>, stanzas 4 and 5.

³ Bernard of Cluny, *De Contemptu Mundi*, Liber I, line 271, <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/bernardcluny1.html>.

⁴ St. John of the Cross, “The Dark Night of the Soul,” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/157984/the-dark-night-of-the-soul>.

⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 3, 6.

and inviting and wonderful.”⁶ Human beings are like moths drawn to a bright light or a flame, but rather than being incinerated by the light’s heat, we are transformed by it into God’s very life, participants in God’s very nature (2Pet 1:4) of light and warmth, graciousness and love. God’s brilliant Light then shines through us into all the world, to and among all peoples, and embraces all of creation. We read in the first letter of Peter: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1Pet 2:9).

The Brilliant Light of the Incarnate Word

We know this and witness to this because of the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, the Son, the Divine Word, Jesus of Nazareth. We profess in the Nicene Creed that he is “God from God, Light from Light, . . . one in being [consubstantial] with the Father.” He is, as we read in the gospel of John, “the light of the world,” and whoever follows him “will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12, see Jn 9:5).

There is an amazing, close connection between the images of Word, Light, and Life to describe the incarnate Son. We see this connection clearly in the Prologue of John’s gospel—so beloved of Arnold Janssen and members of the Arnoldus Family:

In the beginning was the Word,
And the Word was with God,
And the Word was God.
All things came into being through him,
And without him not one thing came into being.
What came into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (Jn 1:1-6)
There was a man sent from God,
Whose name was John.
He came as a witness to testify to the Light,
So that all might believe through him.
He himself was not the Light.
The true Light, which enlightens everyone,
Was coming into the world (Jn 1:6-9).
And the Word became flesh and lived among us,
And we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son

⁶ Richard Rohr, “Great Mystery and Great Intimacy,” Daily Meditation, December 13, 2024, <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/WhctKLbNGSdXXJPjKCTKCPCsnvrDhgvSHbPDcTIVTbRTGJTXXggJTLWkrLThHZkdNQhIVtzG>.

Full of grace and truth (Jn 1:14).
No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son,
Who is close to the Father's heart,
Who has made him known (Jn 1:18).

We see this same connection among Word, Life, and Light in the First Letter of John as well. The Light of the Word allows us to see, and what we see is Life. "what we have looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life. . . . We have seen it and testified to it and proclaim to you the eternal life that was with the Father and made visible to see. . ." (1 Jn 1:2-3).

Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and raised from the dead, is, in Vatican II's words, the Christ, "the light of nations." As Vatican II continues, the bishops assembled there desired "to bring all humanity that light of Christ, which is resplendent on the face of the church, by proclaiming his Gospel to every creature."⁷

We SVDs and Holy Spirit Sisters, members of the Arnoldus Family, witness to this light, who is "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6). We witness to the gospel *about* Jesus and *of* Jesus. We tell the story of this amazing man whose life, ministry, death, and resurrection allow us to see into the deepest Mystery of the Light that is God. And we witness to and proclaim his message of the Reign of God, a reign of "revolutionary intimacy"⁸ between God and humanity, human beings among themselves, and human beings with all of God's creation. The beautiful Preface for the feast of Christ the King speaks of this reign as one that is eternal and universal, a reign of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love, and peace.

In a stunning passage in his *New Seeds of Contemplation*, the great spiritual writer Thomas Merton describes the light that is Christ in a powerful and beautiful way:

[God's] truth and [God's] love pervade all things as the light and heat of the sun pervade our atmosphere . . . As a magnifying glass concentrates the rays of the sun into a little burning knot of heat that can set fire to a dry leaf or a piece of paper, so the mystery of Christ in the Gospel concentrates the rays of God's light and fire to a point that sets fire to the human spirit.⁹

The church's witness to the Light that is Christ, and our witness as SVDs and members of the Arnoldus Family is one that is confident that "the light of

⁷ Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (LG), 1.

⁸ Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2017), 29.

⁹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 2007), 150-

the Word and the Spirit of grace,” can make vanish the darkness of sin and the night of unbelief,” can bring true joy, healing, and meaning to struggling men and women and God’s exquisite yet wounded creation. We pray that the burning heart of Jesus will live in the hearts of all peoples—the flame of that heart is indeed a “light of revelation to the Gentiles” (Lk 2:32).

The Wild and Gentle Light of the Holy Spirit

We witness to that “Spirit of grace” as the Light that can guide our mission and lead women and men to salvation and wholeness. God’s Spirit is the gentle light and enlightenment of Wisdom or the wildness of a flaming fire, stirring women and men to faith and transformation, calling them to give themselves in the work of justice.

US theologian Elizabeth Johnson connects the Spirit to Wisdom, *Sophia*, and while she admits that in the Old Testament “there is no one-on-one correspondence between Wisdom and the Creator Spirit . . . , the similarities of function and relation to divine being are so profound as to allow theology, in the past as now, to adapt wisdom categories for interpretations of the Spirit.”¹⁰ Wisdom is God’s very light:

For she is the breath of the power of God;
a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty . . . ;
For she is a reflection of eternal light;
a flawless mirror of the working of God;
and an image of his goodness (Wisdom 7:25-26)

In the New Testament, the Spirit is imaged as the light and power of fire. John the Baptist proclaims that the one coming after him will baptize “with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt 3:11). Burning with the Spirit that always guided him in his mission, Jesus exclaims that “I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled” (Lk 12:49). That fire arrives at Pentecost, when the Spirit comes as a mighty, rushing wind, and settles as tongues of fire upon the surprised disciples (Acts 2:3-4).

Elizabeth Johnson quotes a “poetic oracle” of Hildegard of Bingen, who writes of this same fiery, powerful presence of the Spirit:

I, the highest and fiery power, have kindled every living spark and have beathed out nothing that can die . . . I flame above the beauty of the fields; I shine in the waters; in the sun, the moon and the stars, I burn. And by means

¹⁰ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 143.

of the airy wind, I stir everything into quickness with a certain invisible life which sustains all . . . I, the fiery power, lie hidden in these things and they blaze from me.¹¹

Church tradition, as well as our own SVD tradition, speaks of the Spirit as light, perhaps much more in the Wisdom tradition of enlightenment and guidance. In the Sequence for the feast of Pentecost we pray:

Veni, Sancte Spiritus,
et emitte caelitus
lucis tuae radium

Holy Spirit come and shine,
On our souls with beams divine,
Issuing from your radiance bright.¹²

The 2009 edition of our SVD *Vademecum* includes a poem-prayer composed by Arnold Janssen, which includes the lines:

L: With your grace,
A: Enlighten us.
.....
L: By your light
A: Direct us.¹³

It also includes two lines in the first of two litanies of the Holy Spirit:

Holy Spirit, Ray of heavenly light,
.....
Holy Spirit, you enlighten and strengthen us,¹⁴

Constitution 105 notes that the Holy Spirit's "light enables us to understand the gospel, to interpret the signs of the times, and thus discern the will of God."¹⁵ Our XIX General Chapter quotes a saying of Arnold Janssen that speaks of the Holy Spirit as light: "Just as sunlight when it shines through falling rain is refracted in the seven beautiful colors of the rainbow, so shines

¹¹ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 138, quoting Hildegard of Bingen, in *Hildegard of Bingen: Mystical Writings*, Fiona Bowie and Oliver Davies (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 91-93.

¹² "Hymn to the Holy Spirit," *Vademecum SVD* (Steyl, Holland: Steyl Press, 1962), 58.

¹³ "St. Arnold's Poem Prayer to the Holy Spirit," *Vademecum SVD* (Rome: SVD Generalate Publications, 2009), 55.

¹⁴ "Litany of the Holy Spirit – I," *Vademecum SVD*, 129.

¹⁵ *The Constitutions of the Society of the Divine Word*, (Rome: SVD Publications, 1983, 2009), 105 (p. 14).

the love of the Holy Spirit in a seven-fold way in the hearts of the saints and gives that special beauty which delights the eyes of a person.”¹⁶

We SVDs and members of the Arnoldus Family witness to the light of the Holy Spirit when we engage in the practice of Prophetic Dialogue—paying attention to our context, gathering in prayerful discernment, listening to one another as we discover the Spirit’s guidance for our mission. Our witness to the Spirit’s light leads us to discover together the best ways that we can be prophetic in our particular cultural, political, and historical contexts. Our witness is never one that is ready made or “one size fits all.” It is rather fresh—deeply faithful to our Christian tradition, deeply faithful to one another, and therefore always creative and innovative.¹⁷ Our witness to the Spirit’s light leads us to proclaim the gospel faithfully and creatively, recognizing how the incarnate Word “plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his,”¹⁸ and leads us deeper into the Holy Mystery that is the Father.

Seeing the World by the Trinity’s Light

When we see the Light that is our Triune God, Holy Mystery, Incarnate Word, Holy Spirit, we see the Light by which we see light itself, and so see the Light by which we can see the world. As Richard Rohr writes, “Light is not really *what* you see; it is *that by which you see everything else*. . . . like light, you do not see God; but God allows you to see everything else through really good eyes.”¹⁹

When we see the the Light that is God, therefore, we see the world, as it were, through God’s eyes. Jesus, the Light of the world, “has given us an illuminating lens by which to see and measure all things.”²⁰ In his classic book of prayers, Michel Quoist writes that, when we see the world through God’s eyes, we see

¹⁶ *Statement of the 19th General Chapter*, in *Documents of the 19th Chapter SVD 2024* (Rome: SVD Publications, 2024), 21 (p. 21), quoting Arnold Janssen, *Precious is the Life Given for Mission* (2010), 35.

¹⁷ See Stephen Bevans, “‘Your Light Must Shine Before Others’ (Matt 5:16): Faithful and Creative Discipleship in a Wounded World: A Reflection on the 2024 SVD General Chapter Theme,” *Verbum SVD* 64, 2 (2023): 159-76.

¹⁸ Gerard Manley Hopkins, “‘As Kingfishers Catch Fire,’” in *Gerard Maley Hopkins: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 129.

¹⁹ Richard Rohr, with Mike Morrell, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (New Kensington, PA: Whittaker House, 2016), 96-97.

²⁰ Richard Rohr, “A Free Gospel and Free People,” Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditations, January 1, 2025.

That everything is linked together,
That all is but a single movement of the whole of humanity and
Of the whole universe toward the Trinity . . .
[We] would understand that nothing is secular, neither things nor
People, nor events,
But that, on the contrary, everything has been made sacred in its origin by God.²¹

Or, as the British poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning beautifully expressed it:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,
The rest sit around it and pluck blackberries.²²

We witness to the Light so that people can see the real world! And when people see the real world, they are experiencing the wholeness that we call salvation. And once they experience that wholeness, they can themselves enter into God's mission of spreading light. As US churchman and spiritual writer, Brian McLaren expresses it beautifully, when people really begin *seeing* the world, they are led "to an active way of being in the world," being themselves salt and light for the world.²³ As Richard Rohr comments, taking an insight from Alcoholics Anonymous, "it's not moving forward by self-promotion, but by attraction. Just set the light on the lampstand and if it's good, and if it's real, and if it's beautiful, people will come."²⁴ Witnessing to the Light is mission, and leads to mission for those whom we help to see the Light!

God's Light among All Peoples

The Light that is our Triune God is present and active among all peoples, and in every particle of creation. As members of the Arnoldus Family we bear witness to this Light, wherever it may be found. This missionary task is expressed clearly and eloquently in our SVD Constitutions 114. Here we read that

²¹ Michel Quoist, *Prayers* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 14-15.

²² Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "Aurora Leigh," in D. H. S. Nicholson and A. H. E. Lee, ed. *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1917).

²³ Brian McLaren, "What Does It Mean To Be Salt and Light?" Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations, January 1, 2025, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/2025-daily-meditations-theme-being-salt-and-light/#h-what-does-it-mean-to-be-salt-and-light>.

²⁴ Richard Rohr, Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations, January 4, 2025, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/a-resistance-position/>.

In God's providential plan all nations are called to salvation. His Word is the light of the world that enlightens everyone (see Jn 1:9). As missionaries of the Divine Word, we must be ready to recognize the rays of this light in the religious traditions and convictions of peoples. In sincere dialogue we bear witness to the fact that the true light has become [flesh] and has come into the world in Jesus of Nazareth. At the same time we will be enriched by other people's religious experience and search for truth.²⁵

This Constitution calls to mind the groundbreaking words of Vatican II's Declaration on Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, that the doctrines of other world religions "often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women."²⁶ It also calls to mind the beautiful words of Anglican missiologist Max Warren that "our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on men's dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival."²⁷

But the dialogue that Constitution 114 calls us to as we witness to God's Light outside the boundaries of our church is not limited to dialogue with people of other religions. Constitution 114.1 calls us to witness to the Light in other Christian ecclesial communities and churches. Constitution 114.2 calls us to witness to the Light "found in the expressions of popular religion both in and outside of Christianity." Constitution 114.3 calls us to dialogue "with the advocates of purely humanist or atheist convictions" (the text actually uses the unfelicitous phrase "serious debate"). Finally, Constitution 114.4 calls us to witness to the Light by cooperation "with those of other religions and convictions in facing contemporary problems."²⁸

Conclusion: *Missio Lucis*

The Final Document of the SVD 2024 General Chapter calls us to witness to the gospel as a *Missio Lucis*. Such participation in the mission of the God of Light "embodies openness to and doing the will of God—honesty, compassion, reconciliation, and the pursuit of justice and peace wherever we live and

²⁵ *The Constitutions*, 114 (p. 18). See the *Statement of the 19th General Chapter*, 32 (p. 24), where Constitution 114 is quoted.

²⁶ Vatican Council II, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, "Nostra Aetate" (NA), 2.

²⁷ Max Warren, Preface to John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 10. See the extended footnote on this famous passage in Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 160, note 7.

²⁸ These Constitutions are found in *The Constitutions*, p. 19.

work.”²⁹ The “light of the Word” throws bright light on the “darkness of sin” and the shadow world of injustice, thus revealing the cause of so many of the wounds of our world. That same light throws bright light as well on our own sinfulness and woundedness. And so we are called to witness to that light, but always as wounded healers, and always with mercy and compassion. “Ignited by the light of Christ [we could say here the light of the Triune God] we are prepared to encounter the darkness and not to run away from it.”³⁰

We are warmed, guided, and challenged by the light of the Triune God as we participate in God’s mission of light. We are warmed and nourished by the sacraments of the church, especially the Eucharist, and the challenge of the dismissal to go forth to proclaim the gospel. We are warmed, guided, and challenged by the written Word of God, which is always a lamp to our feet, a light to our path (Ps 119:105). We are warmed, guided, and challenged by our intercultural life together in community, and by the women and men among whom we minister. Last but certainly not least, we are warmed, guided, and challenged by the beauty of the creation and the seemingly endless variety of creatures, all of whom are reflections of the light of our Triune God.

How privileged, how blessed are we to witness to God’s light that we find all around us—from everywhere for everyone!

²⁹ *Statement of the 19th General Chapter*, 23 (p. 22).

³⁰ *Statement of the 19th General Chapter*, 24 (p. 22).

2

“Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone”—The SVD Jubilee Theme from a Biblical Perspective

Wojciech Szypuła, SVD

The recently concluded XIX General Chapter of the Society of the Divine Word drew its biblical inspiration from Matthew 5:16: “Your light must shine before others.” This selection resonates profoundly with the theme chosen for the Society’s sesquicentennial celebration (1875-2025), which likewise centers on the metaphor of light. This convergence—the metaphor of light appearing in both contexts—underscores a cohesive theological vision and demonstrates the metaphor’s enduring relevance to both the Chapter’s deliberations and the jubilee commemoration.

This reflection explores the jubilee theme by examining its three constituent elements through a biblical lens. It also situates these components—“the light,” “from everywhere,” “for everyone”—within the contemporary missiological landscape confronting the Society of the Divine Word, while establishing connections to the priorities articulated during the recent General Chapter.

Your Light Must Shine

And even though our gospel is veiled, it is veiled for those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, so that they may not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for the sake of Jesus. For God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to bring to light the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of Jesus Christ. But we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us. (2 Cor 4:3-10, NAB)

All the truly great persons I have ever met are characterized by what I would call radical humility and gratitude. They are deeply convinced that they are drawing from another source; they are instruments. Their genius is not their own; it is borrowed. We are moons, not suns, except in our ability to pass on the light. (Richard Rohr)

We begin with a fundamental question: what is meant by “your light”? This phrase derives from Jesus’ declaration, “your light must shine before others” (Matt 5:16 NAB), situated within the Sermon on the Mount—a concise articulation of the foundational principles that undergird the nature and identity of disciples and all who belong to God’s kingdom. In this discourse, Jesus designates his disciples as “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.” The salt metaphor encapsulates the disciples’ identity, while light characterizes their mission. Thus, the essence of living under God’s sovereignty and following Christ encompasses a dual dynamic: being (identity) and illuminating (mission). This integration of ontology and purpose constitutes the core of discipleship.

To elucidate this concept further, we must first discern Jesus’ intended meaning of “the light.” Within the Sermon on the Mount, the light that disciples are called to radiate is nothing less than the teaching on discipleship embodied in the Beatitudes and their consequent mode of being in the world. The Beatitudes present a transformative vision of human existence and relationships that manifest God’s will. To experience divine blessing in this world and beyond requires the embodiment of these Beatitudes. In this hermeneutical framework, “the light” transcends abstract conceptualization; it signifies the revelation imparted by Jesus—a distinctive modality of being and acting.

The disciples were primary witnesses to Jesus’ revelation, both hearing his words and observing his praxis. This divine illumination enlightened them as its initial recipients. For these followers, Jesus’ teaching constituted the “be-attitudes”—an existential modality as light, which they were commissioned to manifest to the world. Consequently, the light was not intrinsic to them but rather the radiance of Christ’s revelation entrusted to their stewardship. Neither originators nor sources of this illumination, Jesus’ disciples were appointed as reflective instruments or beacons, mirroring God’s will and the authentic nature of fully realized humanity according to divine design. Their missiological mandate was to channel the inexhaustible profundity of divine light, casting it upon the world as living mirrors engaged in an eternal and graceful choreography of illumination.

What significance, then, does the possessive pronoun “your” (light) carry? Does it imply that the light belongs intrinsically to the disciples, emerging from their inherent qualities, efforts, virtues, or accomplishments? Such

an interpretation proves untenable, as the disciples' identity and mission remain wholly grounded in Jesus' revelation. The light they bear is not self-generated but ultimately constitutes the divine radiance mediated through Jesus and manifested through their being.

Therefore, "your light" must refer to the divine light refracted and, in so doing, colored by the individual and collective distinctiveness of the disciples, both as a group and as individuals. The light is "your" (or "our") because it is shaped by their (or "our") particular, unique qualities, values, and decisions. The pronoun "your" thus underscores the disciples' responsibility to embody and incarnate the divine revelation within the specificities of their lived experiences and contextual realities.

In application to us, Divine Word missionaries, when we speak of "our light," three immediate corollaries emerge: formation, discernment, and Christocentricity. Formation entails the intentional cultivation of our capacity to receive and transmit divine illumination. Discernment involves the critical evaluation of how we refract this light through our individual and collective charisms. Christocentricity ensures that amid the diversity of our expressions, Christ remains the original and ultimate source of the light we bear witness to in our missiological praxis.

Regarding formation, we stated that the light of revelation is invariably colored by who we are. Here, we address nothing less than the incarnation of the Word within the complex and multifaceted human reality of each individual, with all its attendant implications and consequences. Many are drawn to the Society of the Divine Word through a profound fascination with Scripture. Indeed, the vocational discernment process must scrutinize this motivation: is the candidate genuinely captivated by the Word, or merely seeking ecclesiastical status, office, and benefits?

Formation itself must shape the formandi, just as optical lenses are meticulously polished and crafted to reflect light with greater fidelity and clarity. Primarily, the lens must be properly oriented toward the light source, which necessitates nurturing a biblical focus throughout formation. Secondly, clarity and purposefulness become essential for enhancing transparency and focus. Thus, intellectual biblical formation assumes critical importance. Equally crucial is human and character formation. A psychologically or spiritually mal-formed individual, even when appealing to divine revelation, may distort it into an instrument of division and destruction. One need only examine how Scripture is manipulated in political discourse, by hate-propagating groups, or by fundamentalist ideologues.

Maintaining proper focus of the light and "preserving the clarity of the lenses" demands sustained vigilance. This brings us to the imperative of

ongoing formation. Too many have allowed their zeal for the Word to diminish, subsumed by quotidian demands and dulled by the familiarity of texts encountered repeatedly through liturgical cycles. Revitalizing and reinvigorating our biblical knowledge and spirituality requires deliberate choice and persistent effort, rather than passive reliance on membership within a religious community. “The dying of the light” throughout the course of religious life is a sad but all-too-common reality and a persistent threat demanding constant attention. Likewise, when addressing our light within the context of ongoing formation, we must remain mindful that shortly after discussing “your light,” within that same discourse, Jesus issued a sobering admonition: “If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” (Matt 6:23 NRSV). Formation, therefore, concerns making the “light” authentically ours while ensuring that “your light” does not transmute into darkness.

The second matter that arises from the application of the light metaphor is discernment. While God’s revelation, like the sun, is all-encompassing, our light resembles a focused spotlight, illuminating only a fragment of the vast and complex tapestry of human reality. It is neither possible nor prudent to attempt the illumination of the entire world. The decision regarding where to direct our light—our mission—is integral to making the light uniquely ours. Yet, determining the proper focus of this spotlight is a complex task, given the multitude of needs and the diversity within ourselves and the world. Herein lies the crucial process of discernment: deciding what to embrace and what to relinquish. Such discernment must be guided by our distinctive charism, the needs and circumstances of the communities among whom we minister, and the human and material resources at our disposal. While the light of the Word remains immutable, how and where we choose to manifest it remains entirely our responsibility. In this reality resides both the profound dignity of our vocation and the grave responsibility it entails.

One specific dimension warranting consideration in this discernment is the reality of woundedness and brokenness. The light we project inevitably passes through the fissures and imperfections of our human frailty. Like a glow dimly visible through cracks in a fractured clay jar, so the Gospel radiates with particular vividness through our vulnerabilities and wounds, revealing the transcendent force of the message and God’s presence within our suffering. It is precisely within these sacred spaces of weakness that divine strength manifests itself most profoundly, rendering us authentic witnesses to the Gospel.

Simultaneously, we must confront the wounds of the world—multitudinous and variegated in nature. Which of these wounds demand our attention as bearers of the Divine Word? Which shadows must we dispel so that the

healing light may penetrate and transform these broken places? This discernment, too, constitutes our responsibility, and it is this choice that authenticates the light as truly our light.

The Christocentric nature of the mission defined through the metaphor of light emerges as an obvious consequence of all that has been said thus far. The light we shine is Christ's life, teaching, and presence, echoing St. Paul's words: "We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord." Our ministry is ultimately about leading others to Christ, not to the messenger. Its supreme goal is to foster spiritual growth, drawing those who encounter it into a deeper, personal relationship with Christ. This makes the purpose of ministry both profoundly personal and deeply transformative. While the social and human dimensions of ministry are needed, they must not overshadow its ultimate spiritual aim.

To be the light is to offer direction, meaning, and guidance, unveiling a deeper sense of what it means to be human as intended by the Creator. Therefore, our light as SVD missionaries shines most authentically when the world recognizes in us the radiance of something beyond ourselves—a light that emanates from divine revelation, mediated through Scripture, and guiding and transforming those encircled by the shadows of modern existence: its chaos, injustices, alienation, and the many dark sides of human experience.

The Christocentric nature of the mission defined through the metaphor of light emerges as an inevitable consequence of all that has been articulated thus far. The light we manifest is fundamentally Christ's life, teaching, and presence, resonating with St. Paul's profound declaration: "We do not proclaim ourselves, we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord" (2 Cor 5:4 NRSV). Our mission is principally oriented toward guiding others to Christ, not to the messenger. Its paramount objective is to nurture spiritual transformation, drawing those who encounter it into a more profound relationship with Christ.

This renders the purpose of ministry both deeply personal and profoundly transformative. While the social and humanitarian dimensions of ministry remain essential, they must not eclipse its ultimate spiritual *telos*. To embody the light is to provide direction, meaning, and illumination, revealing a more comprehensive understanding of authentic human existence as envisioned by the Creator. Therefore, our light as SVD missionaries radiates most authentically when the world discerns in us the luminescence of something that transcends our individual selves—a divine radiance emanating from revelation, mediated through Scripture, and illuminating and transforming those enveloped by the shadows of contemporary existence: its chaos, injustices, alienation, meaninglessness, and the multifarious manifestations of human brokenness.

“From Everywhere” – The Commitment to the Word of God

A Vision of Boundless Inclusion

On that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the LORD of hosts. One of these will be called the City of the Sun. On that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the center of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the LORD at its border. It will be a sign and a witness to the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the LORD because of oppressors, he will send them a savior, and will defend and deliver them. The LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the LORD on that day, and will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to the LORD and perform them. On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.” (Isa 19:18-25, NRS)

This extraordinary prophetic passage from Isaiah invites profound reflection on the boundless scope of God’s revelation and salvific plan. The prophet envisions a future wherein even Israel’s longstanding and formidable adversaries—Egypt and Assyria—become recipients of divine self-disclosure. The imagery employed is particularly striking: an altar to the Lord, previously exclusive to Jerusalem and thus symbolizing the locus of authentic worship, is now envisioned at the heart of Egypt, as God manifests Godself to these nations formerly considered outside of the covenant. Furthermore, Egypt and Assyria—the two hegemonic powers of the ancient Near East, historically characterized by mutual enmity and conflict—are depicted worshipping the true God together in harmonious communion, alongside Israel. Collectively, they are designated as “God’s people” and “the work of God’s hands,” designations traditionally and exclusively reserved for Israel alone. This radical prophetic vision underscores themes of inclusion, unity, and reconciliation, presenting a compelling image of the universal and all-embracing nature of God’s redemptive intent for all humanity. It constitutes an unequivocal message of boundless inclusion that vividly illustrates the “from everywhere” dimension of the people of God.

For the Divine Word Missionaries (SVD), this vision of inclusion resonates profoundly with our charism and identity, particularly in its intercultural dimension. The concept of being “from everywhere” transcends mere

theological aspiration to embody a lived reality within our congregation, recognized as one of the most internationally diverse in the Catholic Church. With members representing seventy-six nationalities, we incarnate diversity in its most dynamic manifestation. Our differences—encompassing ethnicity, nationality, language, cultural heritage, and ministerial approaches—are not merely incidental but fundamentally constitutive of our collective identity. We embrace with profound gratitude our status as a truly global community, reflecting in microcosm the universal nature of both the Church and the Kingdom of God.

This diversity manifests itself concretely in our communities, where conferees occasionally originate from nations with historical antagonisms or geopolitical rivalries, reminiscent of the ancient tensions between Egypt and Assyria. Notwithstanding these differences, we endeavor to collaborate in unity, bonded by our shared missionary vocation. Our diversity represents not simply an attribute but a substantive strength, providing a rich tapestry of perspectives and methodological approaches that uniquely equips us to serve effectively in diverse and complex sociocultural contexts. Our ministry with migrants and marginalized populations, for instance, exemplifies the pastoral efficacy of this diversity when properly channeled toward missionary ends.

Nevertheless, diversity inevitably presents challenges to communal cohesion. Absent a unifying foundation, interculturality can cause escalating misunderstandings and tensions—indeed, it frequently does. To address this dialectic between diversity and unity, it becomes imperative to anchor our multicultural reality in a solid and integrative core. For us as Divine Word Missionaries, Sacred Scripture and biblical ministry naturally propose themselves as this unifying foundation. The Word of God functions not merely as the cornerstone of our missionary identity but also as the framework within which our diversity and interculturality can flourish, coexist synergistically, and bear abundant fruit in harmonious collaboration.

Wholehearted Dedication to the Word of God: The “SVD Shema”

“Creative missionary activities are born of love for the Word of God.”

(Pope Francis, Address to the SVD XIX General Chapter)

The concept of “from everywhere” extends far beyond its apparent geographic, ethnic, or cultural dimensions. It resonates profoundly with the interior wellspring within each Divine Word Missionary that animates his missionary vocation and constitutes his fundamental identity. We might articulate this dimension as “from every layer of my being” or “from the totality

of who I am.” In this hermeneutical framework, “from everywhere” signifies the complete and undivided consecration of one’s integral personhood—intellect, corporeality, spirituality, affectivity, temperament, and gifts—to the service of God’s Word. It represents a profound existential commitment to opening oneself receptively and responding dynamically to the Word of God from every facet of one’s existence.

Pope Francis eloquently encapsulated this foundational identity when addressing the XIX General Chapter of the Society of the Divine Word, stating: “Creative missionary activities are born of love for the Word of God.” This insight resonates remarkably with the “Shema Israel,” the paradigmatic declaration that forms the cornerstone of Jewish theological and existential self-understanding and praxis as articulated in Deuteronomy 6:5: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (NRSV). Illumined by Pope Francis’ perceptive observation, we might formulate a corresponding “SVD Shema”: “Love the Word of God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.” This declaration crystallizes the quintessential nature of our identity as Divine Word Missionaries, simultaneously articulating both the generative source and the teleological principle of our missionary charism. Upon deeper reflection, three corollaries to this proposal emerge.

Encountering the Word: A comprehensive commitment

Love for the Word of God begins with a very personal encounter with Scripture through hearing or reading. However, this initial encounter must subsequently transcend sporadic or occasional moments and cannot be limited solely to the parameters of prescribed daily liturgical readings. Such episodic and fragmentary engagement proves fundamentally inadequate for genuine scriptural formation. A substantive relationship with Sacred Scripture necessitates methodical and systematic reading of biblical books in their integral form. Far from constituting an anachronistic practice, such a comprehensive and systematic approach unveils exegetical and theological insights that would otherwise remain obscured. It facilitates the discovery of less prominent, yet profoundly significant passages absent from the liturgical Lectionary, such as one exemplified by the prophetic vision articulated in Isaiah 19 referenced earlier in this reflection.

These scriptural treasures possess the capacity to enrich, inspire, challenge, and direct our missionary praxis more profoundly than frequently cited and familiar pericopes. Their discovery engenders within us a renewed appreciation for the inexhaustible depth and breadth of divine revelation, fostering an approach to Scripture characterized by intellectual curiosity, hermeneutical

humility, and spiritual receptivity—essential qualities for sustaining a vibrant engagement with the biblical text. Moreover, systematic reading enables a more nuanced comprehension of the biblical narrative, which acquires its plenary significance within the literary context of its canonical book or within the broader framework of salvation history. Furthermore, it warrants acknowledgment that our Constitutions explicitly mandate such regular and methodical scriptural engagement (see C. 407.2).

Within this exegetical framework, the hermeneutical principle of *tota scriptura* (the entirety of Scripture), a foundational tenet of the Protestant Reformation, offers a valuable interpretive perspective for the Society of the Divine Word. This principle aligns harmoniously with contemporary Catholic biblical hermeneutics, particularly with the increasingly influential methodology of canonical criticism. The Reformers critiqued the predominant at the time *pericope tradition*—the selective extraction, isolated study, and homiletical application of biblical passages arranged according to the liturgical calendar. Instead, they advocated for *lectio continua*, the sequential and uninterrupted reading of Scripture in its canonical arrangement. This methodological approach proves not only exegetically sound but theologically indispensable, as divine revelation can be properly grasped only within the integrative context of the entire biblical canon. Exclusive reliance on decontextualized texts risks the hermeneutical pitfalls of proof-texting, interpretive manipulation, theological distortion, and potentially fundamentalist readings. Consequently, the practice of engaging Scripture in its canonical entirety—or at minimum, immersing oneself in complete biblical books—proves invaluable, particularly for ministerially and theologically mature religious. By embracing this comprehensive hermeneutical approach, we deepen our encounter with the divine Word and equip ourselves more adequately for the missiological mandate entrusted to our congregation.

Engagement with the Word of God: A living relationship

To love the Word of God necessitates the cultivation of a vibrant, dynamic relationship with Sacred Scripture. This devotion is neither static nor facile but, akin to all living relationships, demands intentional effort, steadfast perseverance, and sacrificial commitment. Biblical texts possess the capacity to bring consolation and spiritual delight, yet they simultaneously confront, challenge, and occasionally frustrate when their profound meanings elude comprehension. These moments of hermeneutical tension should not be seen as exegetical failures but rather as constitutive elements of a relationship that remains vital and evolutive.

Two particular impediments threaten to undermine this sacred devotion: excessive familiarity and spiritual indifference. The former occurs when repeated exposure to well-established texts, particularly those central to the liturgical cycle, diminishes our attentiveness and receptivity. Our familiarity with these pericopes often results in their passing through our intellectual and affective faculties without any resounding or substantive impact or insight. One efficacious remedy for this hermeneutical stagnation is deliberate engagement with extra-lectionary texts, which offer fresh theological perspectives and exegetical insights.

Indifference, frequently emerging from protracted familiarity, presents an even more formidable danger. It is not antipathy but apathy that signifies the dying of authentic devotion. To counteract this spiritual entropy, we must assiduously cultivate our relationship with Scripture through established spiritual practices such as personal reading, contemplative meditation, *Lectio Divina*, communal Bible sharing, and scriptural retreats. However, these practices yield transformative fruit only when approached with genuine sincerity and devotional commitment, rather than as routine obligations. When embraced with appropriate reverence and intentionality, these disciplines ensure that the “SVD Shema” transcends mere rhetorical formulation to become an internalized credo for every member of the Society of the Divine Word.

Intellectual commitment to scripture

While it may appear redundant to even mention here, but still the necessity of rigorous intellectual engagement with Scripture must be emphasized for missionaries entrusted with the ministerial responsibilities of kerygmatic proclamation and catechetical instruction. Biblical scholarship must maintain its role in both initial formation and ongoing professional development. For seminarians, a robust foundation in biblical studies equips them for lifelong engagement with the sacred text. For professed members, continuing theological education—through specialized workshops, academic seminars, and disciplined personal study—proves indispensable for deepening exegetical understanding and sustaining scholarly passion for the biblical corpus. Just as interpersonal relationships flourish through consistent attention and diligent care, our connection to Scripture develops through sustained intellectual investment. This scholarly engagement not only enhances our homiletical and teaching efficacy but also reinforces our personal relationship with the divine Word.

In conclusion, by consecrating ourselves to the Word of God “with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might,” we actualize the essence of the “SVD Shema” and embody the comprehensive significance of

the principle “from everywhere.” While our congregation is indeed characterized by geographical universality, this descriptive statement achieves its plenitude only when it encompasses a holistic devotion to the Word of God emanating from every dimension of our being—intellectual, corporeal, and spiritual. This integral commitment constitutes the fundamental core of our missionary identity, simultaneously inspiring and sustaining us as we illuminate the world with the ineffable richness of divine revelation.

“For Everyone”—Our Mission through Commitment to the Biblical Apostolate

The time is surely coming, says the Lord GOD, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD.

(Amos 8:11 NRSV)

“Think SVD, think Biblical Apostolate.”

(Abp. Paulus Budi Kleden, SVD)

“We realize that in dealing with the word of God, the Bible, we are talking about the very heart of the Society of the Divine Word.... The biblical apostolate forms an integral part of our heritage left to us by Blessed Arnold, and as Divine Word Missionaries we ought to make it a permanent trademark of our mission work”

(Nuntius XII, pp. 710) (HFS A14.1)

Our Name Is Our Mission

The phrase “for everyone” encapsulates the universal scope of our mission. The seminal missionary mandate of Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20 unequivocally highlights the global nature of the Christian mission (“all nations”) and its primary purposes: building communities through baptism and grounding them in the revelation brought by Jesus (“teach them...”). This universal missionary mandate requires continual refinement and renewed embrace. For us, Divine Word Missionaries, this mandate has been explored and articulated in various formulations since our inception. A fundamental question for every SVD member, and a principal focus of each General Chapter, has always been discerning the distinctive vision and particular focus of our mission. As our Congregation commemorates 150 years of service, this question remains as vital and exigent as ever.

A pivotal moment in our recent history of missiological discernment emerged during the XVIII General Chapter (2018), which promulgated the profound declaration: “Our name is our mission” (IDW, 6 [2018], § 17, 53).

While the chapter document did not extensively elaborate this theme, it did illuminate the multivalent meanings of the concept “the Word of God,” which constitutes the foundational element of our name. The document characterized our name as “a permanent challenge,” alluding to five possible hermeneutical frameworks for interpreting the “Word of God,” with Sacred Scripture enumerated as one of those essential dimensions. This rich polyvalence was elegantly described as a “symphony of the Word” (see. *Verbum Domini*, 7). This profound metaphor aptly conveys that the boundlessness plenitude of God’s revelation through Jesus cannot be circumscribed within a single concept or ministerial expression. However, it also elicits a further question: which instruments in this grand symphony is the *Societas Verbi Divini* specifically called to play? Evidently, we cannot perform on every instrument in the vast orchestra that constitutes God’s salvific project for humanity and, indeed, for the renewal of the entire creation!

We observe that the declaration “our name is our mission” appears in the concluding paragraph (§ 53) of the XVIII General Chapter document, standing as its final assertion. However, since the document does not explicitly delineate the implications of this statement, it can be interpreted as an open-ended invitation to action, one that solicits a decisive and substantive response.

Such a narrative technique of open-ended conclusions is profoundly scriptural. The Gospel of Mark, for example, originally concludes at 16:8 with an unresolved account, compelling the reader to contemplate their response to the proclamation of the empty tomb. Similarly, the Acts of the Apostles culminates with a depiction of St. Paul in imprisonment yet still proclaiming the Gospel in Rome. Though Luke undoubtedly possessed knowledge of Paul’s ultimate fate, he elected to terminate the narrative on a note of suspense, inviting readers to perpetuate the narrative of Gospel proclamation through their own lives and ministries. Analogously, the XVIII General Chapter’s document concludes with an open-ended declaration intended to provoke “a serious examination of our ways and means of achieving our missionary goal” (IDW, 6 [2018], §53). This deliberately unresolved conclusion constituted a clear challenge to discern and formulate a response.

Consequently, the subsequent XIX General Chapter (2024) took up where its antecedent left off, and did articulate a response to this challenge. Amidst its diverse deliberations and outcomes, the chapter enunciated a clear and resolute call for a renewed commitment to the Biblical Apostolate as one of the key means to manifest our name through our mission. To appreciate the significance of this development, it must be emphasized that the Biblical Apostolate had been conspicuously absent from the official pronouncements of the preceding four chapters, where no explicit commitment or dedicated

section on the Biblical Apostolate was evident. Fortuitously, our most recent chapter accorded the Biblical Apostolate due attention alongside other characteristic dimensions, perhaps signaling a renaissance of this ministry's indispensable role in our mission.

First, the very first resolution of the XIX GC (preceded only by the procedural stipulation of the new General Administration's assumption of office date) mandates each PRM to implement the "our name is our mission" concept in a "concrete, systematic, organized, sustainable, and accountable way" (Resolution 1.2.2). Even more significantly, the final document incorporates a substantial section dedicated to the Biblical Apostolate (FW, 6 [2024], § 61-65). Here, the document specifies that "the Biblical Apostolate is an intrinsic characteristic of every SVD confrere, regardless of their specific ministry. It is not an exclusive responsibility of selected individuals such as Biblical Apostolate coordinators or PRM leadership. Everyone should incorporate a systematic, organized, sustainable, and accountable approach to biblical ministry" (§62). This unambiguous directive from the chapter underscores that the Biblical Apostolate must not be relegated to chance or individual initiative. Rather, it necessitates a structured, coordinated endeavor across our Society, ensuring that Scripture remains the cornerstone of our life and mission. Is this significant development in our missiological discernment at the Congregational level a manifestation of the *kairos*, a response to the hunger for the Word of God prophesied by Amos?

Another significant moment at the chapter transpired during the address of the outgoing Superior General, Archbishop Paulus Budi Kleden, SVD. In what might be construed as his farewell discourse to the capitulants, he devoted substantial attention to the role of the Biblical Apostolate in SVD life and mission, drawing upon his extensive experience as General Councilor and Superior General. During his address, he articulated a phrase that, I believe, encapsulated a critical aspect of his vision for the future trajectory of our society: "Think SVD, think Biblical Apostolate." This succinct declaration brilliantly distills a core dimension of our identity, one for which we could and should be immediately recognizable in the ecclesiastical and missiological landscape. Archbishop Kleden's parting exhortation may indeed be embraced as a resounding call to action, challenging us to intensify our efforts in advancing the Biblical Apostolate as the distinctive hallmark of our mission.

It is imperative to underscore at this juncture that the Biblical Apostolate represents one of the principal avenues through which we fulfill our mission. Manifestly, it is not the exclusive expression of our missionary commitment, nor does it encompass the totality of what we offer to the contemporary world. However, our very name compels us to establish Sacred Scripture as the

foundation of all we are and undertake. The Biblical Apostolate is not merely an optional ministerial modality; it constitutes an essential component of our identity, affirming that our mission is irreducibly grounded in the Word. Other aspects and dimensions of our mission undoubtedly possess significance and play their proper role. However, without the Biblical Apostolate the “our name is our mission” principle would remain fundamentally incomplete, lacking historical roots, theological depth and its intended missiological significance.

Our Mission through the Biblical Apostolate

What form does our commitment to the Word of God through the Biblical Apostolate assume? It is precisely at this juncture that “the Light” must be transformed into “our light,” as biblical ministry necessarily adapts to the unique context of each PRM, community, and confrere. Just as the biblical texts themselves are profoundly contextualized within their historical and cultural matrices, so too must biblical ministry be contextually situated in order to emerge authentically and function efficaciously. Therefore, it would be presumptuous to attempt to prescribe a singular modality or trajectory for the Biblical Apostolate across the entire Congregation.

Notwithstanding this essential contextualization, three guiding principles that broadly delineate the scope and purpose of Biblical ministry can be postulated: animation, dissemination, and formation. In the initial phase, the role of those conducting biblical apostolate—the biblical ministers—is to ignite interest among those they serve, primarily through the personal witness of being genuinely dedicated to and intellectually and spiritually captivated by the Word. Without the desire kindled by their exemplary commitment, people are unlikely to engage substantively with Scripture. Dissemination naturally follows from this initial inspiration. The Scripture must be accessible, which necessitates the distribution of Bibles and, where needed, translation of the sacred text into vernacular languages. This process culminates in formation, wherein participants are guided into a more profound relationship with the Scriptures, both spiritually and intellectually. This entails enhancing Biblical literacy through exegetical courses, Bible studies, as well as fostering spiritual growth through *Lectio Divina*, communal reading, contemplative prayer, scriptural sharing, and related devotional practices. The guidance, inspiration, and energizing presence of the biblical ministers remain indispensable throughout this transformative journey. Collectively, these sequential steps embody the mission of “shining our light” upon the world.

Bringing these theoretical reflections into concrete praxis, it is instructive to highlight the contribution of the biblical working group at the XIX

General Chapter, which developed a series of pragmatic recommendations for advancing this vital ministry. These suggestions provide a substantive framework for implementing our commitment to the Word and can be synthesized into three cardinal points.

First, SVDs must recognize and embrace their shared responsibility for the Biblical Apostolate. Commitment to Scripture constitutes a vocational imperative for every SVD confrere, irrespective of their specific apostolic domain. It is not circumscribed to any particular role or ministerial function but represents a collective mission that permeates all dimensions of our apostolic endeavors. Whether engaged in parish ministry, educational institutions, justice and peace advocacy, or any other missiological expressions, each confrere is called to integrate Scripture organically into their quotidian activities, ensuring that the Word of God remains a unifying presence and teleological purpose in all our undertakings.

Second, a structured and systematic approach to biblical ministry is indispensable for its viability and fruitfulness. PRMs need to develop achievable and realistic action plans to implement the Biblical Apostolate effectively. These strategic plans should emphasize long-term sustainability, organizational clarity, and transparent accountability, ensuring that this apostolate functions as an interconnected and cohesive enterprise rather than a disconnected assemblage of isolated initiatives.

Finally, without dedicated leadership, efforts to strengthen the Biblical Apostolate are unlikely to attain their intended objectives. Appointing a dedicated full-time Biblical Apostolate coordinator in every province, and where feasible, in regions and missions, is essential for the vitality and perpetuity of this ministry. This leadership role provides the necessary focus and administrative guidance to animate and direct biblical initiatives comprehensively. Providing such specialized leadership would underscore the central importance of Scripture within our missiological paradigm and offer a structured framework to ensure its programmatic effectiveness and intergenerational continuity.

Final Remarks

In conclusion, let us return to the XIX General Chapter, which powerfully characterized our present global context as a “wounded world,” one torn by deepening sociopolitical conflicts and economic divisions, where conspicuous wealth and unprecedented affluence collide with abject poverty and human-induced suffering. The Catholic Church, too, confronts its own struggle for

theological direction and ecclesiastical coherence within this fractured reality and amid its growing internal tensions. In the midst of this multifaceted turmoil, the Chapter summons the Society of the Divine Word and each confrere to function as a luminous presence radiating in the darkness of a troubled and disquieted world.

This reflection has advanced the argument that our focus on Scripture and commitment to the Biblical Apostolate could serve as the quintessential beacon of light we project upon the world by virtue of our distinctive charism. Can we, as a Congregation, embrace this vision with renewed missiological zeal, ensuring that Scripture not only remains the focal point of our mission but also serves as the inexhaustible wellspring of our theological creativity, apostolic passion, and unwavering commitment? This must constitute our preeminent aim, for through steadfast dedication to the Biblical Apostolate, we affirm that our name is indeed our mission in its most profound sense. In doing so, we respond prophetically to the existential hunger for God's Word evident within both the ecclesial community and the broader human society, remaining faithful to the foundational spirit of our SVD vocation and charism.

Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone— Mission Perspective

Lazar T. Stanislaus, SVD

Paul VI wrote, “the first means of evangelization is witness of an authentically Christian life” (EN 41). His often-quoted sentence is, contemporary men and women listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses (see EN 41). The underlining aspect is the authenticity of Christian life. To continue God’s mission both witness and proclamation are significant; mission is carried out by word and deed. There is no witness without proclamation. There should be no proclamation without witness, otherwise it will be an empty noise. Pope Francis said that witness is leaven in the church today.¹ Witnessing by our life and presence itself proclaims. It reminds us of the famous words of Francis of Assisi, “Preach always and if necessary, use words.”

The term “witness” means testimony; hence a person who has seen, heard, or touched a reality gives a testimony. For a Christian, giving witness to the Trinitarian God through his/her life is the first step of evangelization. The Bible is a story of witness.² The different models in the Bible inspire us to bear witness to the Trinitarian God.³ Jesus’ bearing witness to God is the culmination of witness. Jesus says, “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to bear witness to the truth” (Jn 18:37). Through his life, death, and resurrection, he reveals the love of God to the world, hence the truth is God’s love to the world. Throughout his life we see that Jesus bore witness to

¹ Pope Francis’ homily during the Vespers of Presentation of the Lord on 1 February 2025.

² Sinto Jose Porathur, “Witness in the Bible,” *Vidyajothi* 86, no.9 (2022): 681.

³ Porathur, “Witness in the Bible,” 281-297.

God's love, concern, and justice for the people. Our mission is "to be the witnesses of the primacy of God's love."⁴

The Society of the Divine Word celebrates its 150 years of its foundation, the theme of the celebration is "*Witnessing to Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*." In this article, I try to explore the missiological perspective of this theme not only for the Society, but for the whole church.

Witnessing to the Light

In the gospel of John (1:7-8), we read, "He (John the Baptist) came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light but came to bear witness to the light." The phrase "witnessing to the Light" is in testifying about Jesus Christ, who is described as the true light coming into the world. "The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world" (Jn 1:9). Jesus is the light that revealed the immensity of God and showed the love of God in tangible ways through his words and deeds and the healing and forgiving nature of God. He expressed who God is.

Christian witness is first and foremost about Christ who revealed God's love. "Christian witness is always a sharing in his (Christ) witness."⁵ Our primary message is not about why one should attend our church, or how one should vote, but about Jesus Christ. Jesus said in Matthew 5:16, "Let your light shine before others in such a way that they see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven." This call is to do good works that God wants us to do. We are called not to shine our own light, but Christ's light. We are to fill our lamps with a fresh supply of His grace and mercy as we depend upon our fellowship with Christ through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. The good news is that the light of Jesus is for everyone. Jesus offers eternal life to everyone who believes and does the will of the Father – "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mt 12:50).

Witnessing to the Light involves proclaiming, living, and sharing the Light of Christ through individuals and institutions, social transformation,

⁴ Superior General of the Daughters of the Church on 4 February 2025, *Vatican News*, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2025-02/prayer-consecrated-life-daughters-church-interview.html>

⁵ The document on "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct," 2011, accepted by Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, World Council of Churches, World Evangelical Alliance. This gives a broader outlook to witness to Christ and our responsibility in the multi-religious context.

cultural engagement, and even suffering. *Missio Dei* is a call to make Christ known in every nation, culture, and situation so that all may walk in His Light and through this Light, everyone will find the right way. Witnessing to the Light means actively participating in God's mission by testifying to Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, through word, deed, and presence. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (Jn 14:6). The World Council of Churches described witness as "those acts and words by which a Christian or community gives testimony to Christ and invites others to make their response to him."

In his Message for World Mission Day on Sunday, 23 October 2022 on the theme "You will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8), Pope Francis reminded us that "Every Christian is called to be a missionary and a witness of Christ. ... And the church, community of Christ's disciples, has no other mission than that of evangelizing the world by bearing witness to Christ. The identity of the church is to evangelize." To bear witness to Christ is embodying his manifestation of God's love, because through his life, death, and resurrection, he has shown this loving God. This also implies that we are called to go deeper into the Word as "it manifests itself in the various forms, places, persons, and realities. Discovering the Word is an exercise that animates our life."⁶

Four Aspects of Witness

Witnessing to the Light can be done in various ways, let me give four aspects of witness which Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroders' have portrayed.⁷

Witness of Individuals

For an authentic Christian witness what is indispensable as the inner awakening resulting from an encounter with the Divine. The experience of God as *Abba* shaped the life of Jesus and remained a dynamic force that led him to commit himself fully to the mission of bearing witness to God. An authentic life of a Christian by being prayerful, honest, and sincere in his work, being faithful to his/her spouse, willing to listen to friends and enemies, caring sincerely for the sick, poor, and marginalized and so forth evokes attention. The love of God is transmitted through actions, e.g., Mother Theresa, Charles de Foucauld, Carlo Acutis, Pope Francis, and so forth. Individual Christian

⁶ Society of the Divine Word, *In Word and Deed*, Documents of the 18th General Chapter SVD 2018, No. 6 (2018), 53.

⁷ Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2005), 353-357.

witness exposes the depth of relationship one has with Jesus. It is like salt, though little, but it is essential.

Individual Faith Communities

Mahatma Gandhi, while addressing a group of protestant missionaries, succinctly told them, “Let your life speak to us, even as the rose needs no speech, but simply spreads perfume. Even the blind who do not see the rose perceive its fragrance.... If the rose needs no agent, much less does the Gospel of Christ need any agent.... All I want them to do is to live Christian lives, not to annotate them. I have come to this view after a laborious and prayerful search.”⁸ Various communities strive to do their best to witness to Christ by involving in many activities. This can be done only by evolving a mystical fraternity and contemplative fraternity that translate into action with the neighbors, and they experience the love of God being manifested through the Christian community. “We are called to bear witness to a constantly new way of living together in fidelity to the Gospel... Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of community” (EG 92). For the Society of the Divine Word (SVD), *interculturality is part of our DNA*. This has been promoted over the years. This intercultural living must be authentic and intentionally promoted. By being intercultural community and doing intercultural mission, we become contrast communities so that others wonder, express wow, and being attracted to this community.

Institutional Witness

The church is more than a local community, whether Catholic or Anglican or Lutheran church, she is universal in nature and has both global structure and local structures—schools, hospitals, orphanages, etc. The witnesses of these institutions are powerful. The *All India Seminar on The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Humanity* made a pertinent observation long ago: Her (the church’s) mission requires that she herself embody in her own life and structures the Kingdom values of freedom, fellowship, and justice. It also requires that she contributes to the promotion of those values in the ordering of society.⁹ Only in this embodiment, the church can stand out as an authentic witness. Hence, this has to be shown in action, not with pompous celebrations and mighty buildings, but working for the core values of liberation of the

⁸ M.K. Gandhi, *Harijan*, April 17, 1937, quoted by S. Devaraj, “Witness of Life: Our Mission Today,” *Sedos* 45, nos. 11-12 (2013): 255.

⁹ D.S. Amalorpavadoss, ed., *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society* (Bangalore: NBCLC, 1981), 62.

people from injustice and caring for the poor and excluded. When institutions had tolerated sexual abuse cases or involved in corruption or not caring for the poor and vulnerable, we slam the door at the face of Jesus. We have been counter-witness in some places and now, it is time to regain our core value of institutional witness, and this has power to change, challenge and transform the world.

Common Witness

Common witness is that various Christian traditions come together and engage in effective missionary work in transforming the world. We have been talking about ecumenism for a long time; this has to be translated into action. At the Synod of Bishops on the *New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith* in 2012, the presence of the Patriarch of Constantinople, His Holiness Bartholomaios I, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, His Grace Rowan Williams, was a precious Christian witness (EG 25) of showing that we need to create more occasions like this. Pope Francis has taken a lot of initiatives to bring unity and promote ecumenism, but it has to percolate in the local level showing common witness. David Bosch had given this common witness as one of the paradigms of mission. He said, “we have to confess that the *loss of ecclesial unity is not just a vexation but a sin*. Unity is no optional extra. It is, in Christ, already a fact, a given. At the same time, it is a command: ‘Be one!’”¹⁰

From Everywhere for Everyone

The understanding of *missio Dei* today leads to broader perspectives. God has created everyone in his own image and likeness and God is the creator, father, mother, and protector and he accompanies everyone. He is the creator, and this drives us to recognize the revelation in Others—in other religions and cultures. The question is how to understand the work of God in the Other and recognition of God’s truth as revealed in the Other. Every religion or culture has a dark side in its history, including Christianity. Vatican II has affirmed, “the Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in the other religions, but respects the presence of grace, truth and holiness in other religions” (NA 2). It offered a positive description of the values found in Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism (NA 2-4). The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference

¹⁰ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 467.

(FABC 1974) said, “We accept them (other religions) as significant and positive elements in the economy of God’s design of salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. ... How then can we not give them reverence and honour? And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them?”¹¹

Antonio Pernia emphasized, “Missions implies that we recognize the work of God in others as part of the *missio Dei* and enter into it.”¹² Pascal proposes to understand God in others, we need *hermeneutics of perception*.¹³ Perceiving the works of the Holy Spirit, perceiving the presence of Jesus Christ is a discovery that leads to affirm our commitment to the other. The Peter and Cornelius encounter in Acts 10 unravels the presence of the Spirit in others. To understand deeply of the presence of the Divine in others, Pascal says, “Engaging in the hermeneutics of perception in recognizing God’s work in the other will impact the way we respond to the other. As the Holy Spirit helped Peter to overcome cultural and theological barriers, may he also erase our exclusive mindset.”¹⁴

Mission is carried out today with others because of the recognition of God in others and the working of the Holy Spirit. The truth and holiness is found; thus, mission is not from Christians alone to witness to the truth, but together with others. Therefore, mission done with everyone enlarges the sphere for all the people. “Christian missions *with* the people express a new mission approach for our present-day pluralistic context. Inherent in this approach is the actual attempt to grasp God’s saving grace in the other – including the religious other – and simultaneously remain grounded in the truth which is wholly revealed in Jesus.”¹⁵ In this jubilee year, the challenge is to recognize the presence, power and actions of God being manifested through the Holy Spirit in other places, religions, and cultures. The risen Christ is present in all. How can we identify his presence and give glory?

Mission *ad gentes* is mostly identified with mission *ad extra*, out there; it is going out to the “pagan nations” or “pagan communities” or “not baptized people,” Recognizing the Divine and the Holy Spirit in others, Mission *inter gentes* broadens the understanding of mission and gives emphasis to dialogue *with* people, encounter *between* people, and finding a home *among* the

¹¹ FABC, *Statement of the Plenary Assembly of the FABC*, Taipei, 1974, nos. 14-15.

¹² See Antonio M. Pernia, “The State of Mission Today,” *Verbum SVD* 55, no.1 (2014): 20.

¹³ OFM International, “Recognizing God in the Other: Christian Missions with a Multi-religious World,” March 18, 2019, <https://omf.org/recognizing-god-in-the-other-christian-missions-with-a-multi-religious-world/>

¹⁴ OFM International, “Recognizing God in the Other.”

¹⁵ OFM International, “Recognizing God in the Other.”

people.¹⁶ Recognizing the goodness, truth and integrity in others, our mission cannot be of superiority complex, but we share the truth with others. This signifies a collaborative attitude of sharing or dialoguing with others. Thus, *from everywhere* signifies the power of the Divine from all. Christians too need to deepen our relationship with Jesus Christ and with humility we share the love that we experience, and others too share their divine experience. *For everyone* signifies whoever is lacking the thirst for the Divine, the experience of the love of God, the unfathomable mercy of God, Christians together with other religions and cultures show forth with certain actions bringing peace and harmony in the world. This serves as light dispelling the darkness. The reaching out, serving, and healing them signify as light of Christ.

Understanding the present realities, former superior general Fr. Heinz Kulüke, SVD said, “*Inter Gentes* was given preference over ‘*Ad Gentes*’ in order to emphasize that our way into the future can only be a way *with* and *among* the people... *Inter Gentes* is a reminder that our life as religious missionaries should be near to the people.”¹⁷ In this context, the religious communities promote interculturality, in its deeper implication, everyone has mission for others. Thus, recognition, respect and dignity are given to all peoples and cultures, and our mission is an invitation to do together towards building a joyful community. Over the years, the church has engaged in dialogue with states, cultures, sciences, and other religions (EG 238), but now, it sees the urgency as well as the intensity of doing mission in this way. The church no longer can think of building the reign of God on its own; it must always be invitational, relational, and nonviolent with the other.¹⁸ This is the way of realizing it.

Paradigms of Witnessing to the Light Among Everyone

The essence of the mission is to bear witness to Christ, that is, to his life, passion, death, and resurrection for the love of the Father and of humanity. This witness to Christ stands as bright light, not flickering light, shows the path with wider perception of the cultures, religions, and peoples because there is presence of Christ everywhere and in everyone. To be effective in this mission of bearing witness, the following paradigms are significant.

¹⁶ Pernia, “The State of Mission Today,” 15-17.

¹⁷ Society of the Divine Word, *Arnoldus Nota* (August – September 2013): 1.

¹⁸ Synthesis of IACM Conference on “*Missio Inter Gentes*: Challenges and Opportunities,” Kenya, July 15-21, 2013.

Kenotic Spirituality

Kenosis is emptying oneself and placing oneself at the feet of the Lord as a powerless person, and this enables the person to receive the power and strength of the Spirit. “(Jesus) emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men (Phil 2:7);” this portrays the submission to the Spirit. Kenotic spirituality is acquainted with the experience of God’s hiddenness, taking a posture of watching and prayer within the silence of God. Kenotic spirituality is to primarily identify with the crucified Christ; This involves suffering with him and embracing fellow human beings on the grounds of grace.

The kenotic virtues of compassion, hope, patience, and humility will conspicuously change one’s moral psychology (perceptions, inclinations, and sense of identity). An emerging kenotic ethic will prioritize fellowship with those who are different and radical solidarity with the suffering Other. It overcomes alienation of others by way of authentic relationships.¹⁹ “His/her approach to mission will be to share the faith as a gift received from God through others, conscious of himself or herself as merely its steward or servant and never its owner or master.”²⁰

When one lives a kenotic spirituality of intimate identification with the crucified Christ, it is likely that one’s inclinations to simply tolerate the other will die. The love of God dislodges us from our self-centeredness so that we may enter into the joys and sorrows of another. The virtues of compassion and hope would drive the person for impending action for anyone. He/she will not distinguish based on nationality, color, or religion. The divine in a person invites the Spirit-filled person for authentic relationship and attends to the immediate needs of the person. This serves as witness to Christ who emptied himself. This has mission of attraction because kenotic spirituality is a model of Christian discipleship.

Transformative Social Action

The church has been involved in charity or social work activities for many ages. It continues to do so. This is needed because of the context of certain places and countries. The question is whether charitable activities bring transformation into society. One of the critiques in India, Swami Agnivesh once told us in Pune, “I don’t like Mother Theresa, but I love Oscar Romero”

¹⁹ Kerry Kronberg, “Kenosis as a Spirituality and an Ethic: The Church and Secularity,” Saint Paul University, Canada, 2018.

²⁰ Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, eds., *Mission for the Twenty-First Century* (Chicago: The Center for Global Ministries, 2001), 19.

because of their approach to the people. Well, Mother Theresa was responding to certain context in which others were not doing—a kenotic spiritual action of compassion to the wounded, excluded and living in utter poverty. Oscar Romero, through his prophetic voice, aimed at transformative action of respect, dignity, and freedom for the people. Both are valuable, but what is needed according to the context of each country/place and how can we witness to Christ?

Transformative social action is key for witness today. Alleviating poverty would certainly fill empty stomachs and give the poor a better human condition. Charity is inevitably necessary, but moving from charity syndrome to social action, to affirmative planning and action are also necessary. Education, self-empowerment, and one's identity in the cultural sphere lead to social activism and social action. In these respects, addressing gender-based violence, gender inequality, and human rights concerns take a central stage.

Working for justice, creating an atmosphere of peace and joy among people, being with them in their suffering and pain, helping them to cast away the slave mentality and to assert their cultural identity are some of the ways of helping them out of their entrenched situation and making them more human. This transformation of the poor could be done by networking with other NGOs and with groups of similar mindsets from other religions and cultures. Thus, Christians and people of other faith can work together for an alternative society, giving testimony to people that God is alive, and his love is magnificent. Most importantly today, the poor have to be active participants in this transformative process. The planning, execution and evaluation are to be made together with the poor and marginalized people. "The Church needs passionate missionaries, enthusiastic about sharing true life" (*Gaudete et Exsultate* 138).

Social activists in mission have basically an implicit or personal faith and an explicit one of faith-in-action. Implicit faith requires that he/she be a believer and can grow in faith. Explicit faith makes a person live out his/her faith in relation with vulnerable people, with people of other faiths and work with others for the development of the people. When poor people and their situation are transformed, they experience the tangible love of God. Transformative social action *is mission* which calls for creative *ahimsa* (non-violence) and a radical compassion. It calls for a spirituality of authentic discipleship through active involvement, and a prophetic challenge to unjust structures.

Missionaries of Hope

Pope Francis said, while addressing the capitulars of the 19th SVD General Chapter, “You must be the hope for every culture. On the eve of the Jubilee Year, in this wounded world, our communities must become signs of hope.”²¹ Our union with Jesus give this hope in each of us. Paul describes Jesus Christ as “our hope” (1 Tim 1:1) and “the blessed hope” (Titus 2:13). Jesus not only came to bring hope, but he is also our hope. Jesus Christ is the hope of the world, but you must put your hope in him personally. To hope in Christ means recognizing and personally trusting him as God’s salvation. “By his (God’s) great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet 1:3). We have hope because Jesus forgives us and transforms us into his likeness. Knowing Jesus brings contentment regardless of our unworthiness and gives joy despite difficult circumstances.

David Bosch articulates “mission as action in hope” in his discussions of the many elements of the emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm.²² The theology of hope emerged in the 1960s. Its leading proponent was a German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, who believed that God’s promise to act in the future is to be considered important. He urged the church to act in public life, and to participate actively in the world for a better future. “The Christian is to be regarded as a ‘hoper’ who is impatient with evil and death in this present age. This theology has had much influence and impact in the third-world churches.”²³ The mission of the church today is to be impatient with injustice, exploitation and suffering in the world and giving hope. The world order is slowly changing today. Some countries want to protect only their interest and close their eyes to the sufferings of their neighbors, to some extent, they even ill-treat others. Let us look at the sufferings of the Rohingyas in Myanmar, the Christians in Nigeria, the Muslims in Gaza, the civilians in D.R. Congo and Somalia, the migrants in Europe and United States and so forth. Giving hope is establishing justice, valuing human dignity and rights, giving respect, and finding solutions for better living.

The image of hope has been given by K. Koyama in his article, “The Happiness of Hope,” that God is the God who runs from the center to the periphery, thus transforming the periphery into the center and the God who turns the

²¹ *Faithful to the Word*, Documents of the 19th General Chapter SVD 2024, No. 6, 2024, 71.

²² 1 Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 368-507.

²³ Thinandavha Derrick Mashau, “Mission as Action in Hope in the Context of White Poverty in Pretoria: A Case for Bethlehem Mission Centre in Pretoria West,” *Acta Theologica* 16, no. 1S (January 2009): 54–69, <https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v32i1S.4>.

invisible into the visible. The disciples of Jesus, who lived through the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, learned that, when God seems most absent, he is closer to all, and when God looks so powerless, he is most powerful. When God looks most dead, he is coming back to life. They had learnt never to count God out.

Pope Francis' Address at the Opening of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, 3 October 2018 was precisely giving hope to the youngsters, he said, "(Synod of Bishops is) to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another, and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands." This is exactly what our mission is, wherever we are, teach people to dream and find ways that their hope is being fulfilled.

The central theme of the Jubilee 2025 is "Pilgrims of Hope." This Jubilee invites all Catholics to embark on a journey of faith and transformation. This is a year of hope for a world suffering the impacts of war, the ongoing effects of COVID-19 pandemic, and the climate crisis. Pope Francis asserts, to hope is to begin again and again, to be united with Christ and find new ways of living. Here, to give this vitality to hope for is the role of the missionaries, thus our mission is not of doom, but of hope—a realistic hope.

Synodality – a Mission Approach

Synodality is not a question of being in fashion because everyone is talking about it in the church. If one executes it in real life, this is a game changer in our mission. Pope Francis says, "Synodality is essentially missionary and, vice versa, mission is always synodal." (Message for World Mission Day, 20 October 2024). Again, he reiterates to the SVDs, "to be missionaries of synodality."²⁴

The Document of the General Secretariat of the Synod: "How to be a synodal Church on mission?" says, "If the drive for mission is constitutive of the Church and marks every moment of her history, missionary challenges will change over time. An effort must, therefore, be made to discern those of today's world: if we fail to identify and respond to them, our proclamation will lose relevance and attractiveness. Rooted in this need is the focus on young people, on digital culture, and the need to involve the poor and marginalized in the synodal process..."²⁵ The depth of witness comes from this process of

²⁴ *Faithful to the Word*, No. 6, 2024, 72.

²⁵ Document of the General Secretariat of the Synod: "How to be a Synodal Church on Mission? Five Perspectives for Theological Exploration in View of the Second Session of the

synodal approach with the young, poor, and marginalized. Is the church ready for this?

The Final document of the Synod of Bishops on Synodality (2024) says that formation of candidates for ordained ministry should be undertaken in a synodal way. There should be enough representatives of women, ecumenical dimension, taking the concerns of digital age, human rights, integral ecology and culture of safeguarding in the church.²⁶ “The Church’s synodality, thus, becomes a social prophecy for today’s world, inspiring new paths in the political and economic spheres, as well as collaborating with all those who believe in fellowship and peace in an exchange of gifts with the world.”²⁷

The ultimate meaning of synodality is the witness that the church is called to give to God who sent his Son, expressing his love to the world. Witnessing to Christ entails that the life of the church becomes synodal. As missionaries, we are urged to be synodal—“missionaries of synodality.” We are called to listen, dialogue, and discern with the people. Then, our approach and lifestyle changes. Our way of formation, running a parish, working in social action or educational institutions and centers of retreat or counselling will change. Are we prepared for this? Or are we willing to change? Today, synodal must be part of life. What people experience today is that the church talks about synodality loudly, but on the ground, hardly any change has happened. Analyzing how the recent Conference of Catholic Bishops of India (CCBI 2025) was organized, the status quo was kept, nominal participation of women and laity, but being open to the media, involving more members of women and laity and listening to them were missing. The theme was “Discerning Synodal Paths for the Mission.” This should have included listening to the poor, other religions, and cultures. A collective discussion and discernment would have shown that the Indian church is true to its theme.

Promotion of Peace and Harmony with Other Religions

Inter-faith dialogue has been evolving over the years with better understanding of religions and thus our approach has been changing, but the doctrine has remained the same. The earlier approach for diversity of religions was, looking for commonalities to engage in dialogue and for certain actions. Pope Francis, in his *Fratelli Tutti* encyclical changes this perspective to focus

XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,” 14.03.2024, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/03/14/240314g.html>

²⁶ *Final Document*, 148-151.

²⁷ *Final Document*, 153.

on common issues of humanity that needs attention today.²⁸ He says, “religious convictions about the sacred meaning of human life permit us to recognize the fundamental values of our common humanity, values in the name of which we can and must cooperate, build and dialogue, pardon and grow” (FT 283).

In a world where secularization is advancing more and more, “the only antidote to this is encounter and dialogue marked by friendship and respect between persons of different religious traditions.” This “can help us to overcome a further suspicious attitude which sadly we see increasingly in highly secularized societies, namely the suspicion or even hostility directed not only towards particular religious traditions, but toward the religious dimension as such,”²⁹ said Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle at Abu Dhabi on 4 February 2025.

Our mission from everywhere for everyone calls to the attention of *synodality with other religions*. This “takes expression in interfaith interaction and harmony among religious, national, and cultural communities.”³⁰ Here, religion will not be the center of life, but life will be the center of religion. Thus, listening, sharing, discussing, and discerning the Divine for harmonious living and promoting peace is the future. This is a mission paradigm from everywhere for everyone. Today people need peace and harmony; they suffer too much from an exclusive approach, ego-centered leadership, and parochialism.

In many countries, the religious fundamentalists create havoc, terrorize the Christians, use violence, and even kill many believers. This happens in North African countries, India, Indonesia and so forth. Religion is used as a political tool to gain power and alienate others at any cost. Human freedom and values are put under the carpet, but they thrive on political power which in turn holds on to social and economic power. Ideologies are created in such a way that suits their goal. Here, our mission is to witness to the Light by promoting peace and harmony from everywhere for everyone. The brighter we are in showing the Light with our approach, method, and life towards peace and harmony, the better we can succeed in building the reign of God. In this process, suffering and martyrdom are to be part of our missionary journey.

A Catholic-run hospital and a college in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, India have offered free meals to Hindu devotees as millions gather to attend the Kumbh Mela, dubbed the world’s largest religious gathering in

²⁸ Felix Wilfred, “Pope Francis and Interreligious Dialogue,” <https://books.google.it/books?hl=en&lr=&id=gWrwEAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA284&dq>

²⁹ Agenzia Fides, “SIA/UNITED ARAB EMIRATES - Cardinal Tagle: Dialogue as an Antidote to Distrust and Hostility towards the Religious Dimension,” *Fides News Agency*, February 4, 2025, <https://www.fides.org/en/news/75993>.

³⁰ M.D. Thomas, “Synodality with Other Religions,” *Vidyajyothi* 88, no. 3 (2024): 183.

February 2025.³¹ Christians working for refugees of Rohingya or civil war in Sudan are some of the examples of reaching out to them in need, this is charity that leads to respect for others. Peace and harmony come through relationships, friendship, and reaching out to those in need.

Being Prophetic Witness

Prophets' life speaks, inspires, and challenges others. They announce what God is saying to the people. They seek conversion of the people, protest evil deeds, sow dissent, and more importantly indicate a change or show an alternative way of life. They inaugurate a new path, a new movement, and a new society. Today, the church needs such prophets to protest evil and to show an alternative way of life. A prophet is a whistle-blower as he alerts people, and a sentinel. Prophets are friends of truth, friends of peace. "Apart from the difficulties and contradictions inherent in the prophet's mandate as a witness to the truth, he/she also appears as a torchbearer, a bearer of hope, the one who is the voice of the voiceless, the one who voices aloud what people are mumbling from fear of reprehension."³²

Being a prophet itself is a witness. Today prophetic witness stresses more in the context of being light and standing out in society where there is rampant injustice, conflicts, and wars. Through prophetic witness, one sees Jesus who liberated the people from the unjust customs, oppression, and sickness. His actions spoke louder than the words. People could not avoid his presence, his contact, and his message. Thus, as missionaries, being witness to Light calls us to be prophetic witness like Jesus.

Pier Luigi Maccalli, SMA was kidnapped in 2018, and he was in chains for two years; later he was liberated. His crime was being a missionary in Niger and Ivory Coast. He says, "my legs were chained, but not my heart." Being a witness in the conflict zones is challenging. Conflicts and wars are not synonymous. "One need not fear conflicts. One must fear violence and war and learn to disarm it. As an ex-hostage and a free man, I say and repeat: let us disarm the word! The word is the spark that ignites every conflict."³³ Prophetism comes from how we use our words, how we speak with one another. Jesus spoke kind words to the sinners, poor, and outcasts, and he spoke harsh

³¹ "Indian Catholics Lend Helping Hand to Kumbh Mela Pilgrims," *UCA News*, February 6, 2025, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/indian-catholics-lend-helping-hand-to-kumbh-mela-pilgrims/107801>.

³² Dieudonné Cardinal Nzapalainga, "Temoignage Prophetique pour la Communion Universelle Mission dans les Zones de Conflits et Guerison," *Sedos*, 56, nos. 9-10 (2024): 9-10.

³³ Pier Luigi Maccalli, "Mission in Conflict Zones and Healing," *Sedos*, 56, nos. 9-10 (2024): 33.

words to exploiters of the law and discriminated. His orientation was clear, sharing love of God with everyone but with prophetic witness.

For this, we need prophetic courage—standing for the truth, being with the exploited people, and raising the voice again unjust systems and structures. John the Baptist was a witness to the truth, could not say anything other than the truth contemplated, the truth encountered, the truth proclaimed as he indicated Jesus: “Behold, the Lamb of God” (Jn 1:29). This prophetic courage is like a bright light, and it comes only through personal conviction and sacrifice. Conviction comes through contemplation and union with Jesus.

In this jubilee year, prophetic courage and prophetic witness are powerful medium of pointing to others that the Divine is present, tangible, and active. Through our prophetic witness, they see Jesus in us, his thirst for justice and peace. Pope Francis said, “life only has value if we give it, if we give it in love, in truth, if we give it as “the sincere gift of self to others” in daily life (FT 87). This is the way of mission Jesus has shown us. In certain countries, the realities are different, violence dominates, and it destroys the people. Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga, Metropolitan Archbishop of Bangui who has seen the violence in Central African Republic says, young boys are made military generals and handed over the guns to kill the enemies.³⁴ Being a missionary of prophetic courage and prophetic witness is a challenge, but it has to be our way of life not only in this jubilee year but for the future.

Conclusion

Many wonder why the SVDs took the theme of Light and from everywhere for everyone. The 2024 SVD General Chapter’s part of the theme was “‘Your Light Must Shine Before Others’ (Mt 5:16).” It gave the direction of *missio dei* and *missio lucis*, indicating how Mother Mary gave witness to the Light; thus, we too bear witness to the Light and this should be a powerful spark in carrying out God’s mission in this wounded world. We want to continue this approach in the coming years. Normally *from* is associated with *to*—a normal grammatical line, but with the understanding of there is the presence of Light everywhere and by recognizing this Light, we collaborate with those persons and exercise our mission. Thus, this cannot be *to* but *for* everyone, indicating everyone has Light and is capable of receiving more Light to be united with the one Divine, so that this Divine is glorified through life. This is a mission approach—a collective approach in this pluralistic world.

³⁴ Dieudonné, *Temoignage*, 11.

Reading the Jubilee Theme of SVD, “Witnessing to the Light: From Every- where for Everyone” in the Light of *Evangelii Gaudium*

Herlina Hadia, SSpS

Rooted in the charism of St. Arnold Janssen, the Society of the Divine Word known as SVD has always emphasized bringing the Word of God with joy to those who have not yet heard it, especially among the poor and marginalized. In today’s rapidly changing world, the mission of evangelization faces both new challenges and new opportunities. Cultural shifts, religious indifference, and growing social inequalities call for a renewed approach to proclaiming the Gospel—one that is not only rooted in tradition but also responsive to the signs of the times. The SVD, with its intercultural and international character, is uniquely positioned to respond to this call.

As they celebrate the 150th anniversary of their foundation, it is a meaningful time to revisit the call to be “witnesses to the Light from everywhere for everyone”—a call to become renewed missionaries that deeply resonates with Pope Francis’ vision of a renewed joyful and outward-looking Church. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Pope urges the faithful to become missionary disciples who are not afraid to go to the peripheries, bringing the light of Christ to those most in need. This spirit of joyful outreach is at the heart of the SVD’s missionary identity, making the jubilee not just a celebration of the past, but a renewed commitment to the future of mission in a wounded yet hopeful world.

My reflection, therefore, explores how the SVD’s jubilee theme aligns with the key principles of *EG*, which will be divided into three parts. The first part is the overview of *EG* to provide a clear foundation for understanding the connections I will later draw with the SVD’s jubilee theme. The second part

presents the discussion on the jubilee theme of SVD as missionary option in the Spirit of *EG*; and in last part, I will address the call of Pope Francis to all missionaries to a transformative evangelization.

Evangelii Gaudium: An Overview

Evangelii Gaudium (*EG*) is the first Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis on The Proclamation of The Gospel in Today's World, released in 2013, six months after his election. Pope Francis begins with these words: "The Joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness, and loneliness. With Christ, joy is constantly born anew" (*EG* 1). This is a powerful statement and at the same time challenging especially for the missionaries who witness to the Light. At the heart of *EG* is a call to begin a new era of evangelization, which characterized by the joy that flourishes from a relationship with Christ. Gerard Mannion views this document as "an energizing vision toward a new way of being Church."¹ Being new means openness to being renewed by the Light of the Word.

This document is divided into five interrelated sections where Pope Francis offers deep points to be reflected and acted upon by the whole Church. In the first chapter, he calls for a missionary transformation of the Church, emphasizing that evangelization must be at the heart of its identity (*EG* 19). The Church is not just an institution for its members but a missionary community sent to share the Gospel with the entire world, thus, being "the Church that goes forth from its comfort zones to all the peripheries in need of the light of the Gospel" (*EG* 20). This call for transformation is not just about external outreach; it demands an internal renewal within the Church to focus on its core mission. "Mere administration" can no longer be enough. Throughout the world, let us be "permanently in a state of mission" (*EG* 25). This missionary endeavor "seeks to communicate more effectively the truth of the Gospel in a specific context" and that "goes beyond a set of intellectual ideas."² This is what the SVDs call witnessing from everywhere for everyone. It goes beyond time and context, beyond borders and ideas.

¹ Gerard Mannion, ed., *Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism Evangelii Gaudium and Papal Agenda* (Cambridge: University Press, 2017), 12.

² Dennis M. Doyle, "Pope Francis's New Vision for the Church as Expressed in *Evangelii gaudium*," in *Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism Evangelii Gaudium and Papal Agenda*, ed. Gerard Mannion (Cambridge: University Press, 2017), 25.

In the second chapter, Francis acknowledges the crisis of communal commitment in the Church today and invites all missionaries to engage in “an evangelical discernment, which is an approach nourished by the light and strength of the Holy Spirit” (EG 50). Secularism, individualism, and a weakening of community have led to a lack of shared responsibility among Christians. This crisis must be addressed for evangelization to be successful, as a fragmented Church cannot effectively proclaim the Gospel. He stresses here the importance of belonging to a community and working together.

The challenges are not only seen in the world but also faced by pastoral workers, clergy, and laity alike. There is “an inordinate concern for their personal freedom and relaxation, which leads them to see their work as a mere appendage to their life, as if it were not part of their very identity” (EG 78). Pastoral workers might begin to prioritize comfort, leisure, or autonomy over service, sacrifice, and presence, which are core to their vocation. In a culture that often champions self-care, personal space, and flexible work-life balance, it is easy for even those in ministry to internalize the idea that their primary identity is as individuals seeking fulfillment, rather than as servants called to give of themselves for others.

He even mentions “three evils which fuel one another namely: a heightened individualism, a crisis of identity and a cooling of fervour” (EG 78). These three interconnected evils pose a serious threat to the life and mission of pastoral workers. When individuals become overly focused on personal freedom and comfort, they risk losing sight of their deeper calling, leading to a weakened sense of identity as servants of the Gospel. This confusion about their role and purpose then results in a loss of spiritual zeal and passion for ministry. As fervour fades, ministry becomes routine or burdensome, reinforcing self-centeredness and deepening the crisis. Together, these forces create a cycle that slowly erodes the vitality of pastoral service. To break this cycle, there must be a renewed commitment to community, a clear understanding of one’s vocation, and a deepening relationship with Christ, the source of true joy and purpose in ministry.

The third chapter then focuses on the proclamation of the Gospel, which, according to Pope Francis, is the central mission of the Church. The Church, according to him is “agent of evangelization, more than an organic and hierarchical institution; a people advancing on its pilgrim way towards God” (EG 111). The Church is “a people for everyone, a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel” (EG 114). The Church is also “a people of many faces, peoples of the earth, each of which has its own culture” (EG 115). The members of the Church are all “missionary disciples called to mature their

work as evangelizer” (EG 121). Evangelization is not just about teaching doctrines but sharing the joy, hope and freedom of the Gospel in a way that resonates with contemporary people, especially the poor and marginalized (EG 114). A profound being as missionary according to him is “bringing the love of God in daily responsibility, to the neighbors or complete strangers” (EG 127). Witnessing to the Light from everywhere for everyone indicates this everyday encounter with others.

Preaching within the liturgy is also touched by Pope Francis in this chapter. The homily, says the Pope, needs to be seen as “part of the offering made to the Father and a mediation of the grace which Christ pours out during the celebration” (EG 138). In the homily, “truth goes hand in hand with beauty and goodness. Far from dealing with abstract truths or cold syllogisms, it communicates the beauty of the images used by the Lord to encourage the practice of good” (EG 142). This echoes an ancient insight from classical philosophy and Christian theology that truth, beauty, and goodness are inseparable attributes of God. They are often referred to as the transcendental, qualities that point us toward the divine. So when the people encounter something truly beautiful or deeply good, it can lead them into truth and vice versa. In preaching, this means that truth is not just about facts or doctrines. It is about something that touches the whole person: intellect, heart, and soul. The homily, then, becomes a moment where truth is incarnated—not just argued but *shown, felt, and experienced*. Hence it needs to be prepared. When the homily is seen as a way to witness to the Light, the preacher is called to reflect deeply and help the congregation encounter God’s beauty and goodness in meaningful ways.

Pope Francis in the fourth chapter expands the scope of evangelization to include its social dimension. He begins this chapter by saying “to evangelize is to make the kingdom of God present in our world” (EG 176). Evangelization is about transforming reality. It is not enough to proclaim Jesus with words. The Gospel must be embodied in action, in policies, in social structures, in how we treat one another, especially the marginalized. In a very powerful voice he stresses that “the kerygma has a clear social content: at the very heart of the Gospel is life in community and engagement with others” (EG 177). Evangelization, he argues, must address social justice issues, promote peace, and defend the dignity of the human person, particularly through action on behalf of the poor (EG 187). These ties the Church’s spiritual mission to real-world concerns, showing that evangelization cannot be detached from the material realities of human life. Witnessing to the Light from everywhere for everyone has its dimension, affirming that SVDs are formed within and belong to a religious community, and together they strive to make a positive impact on the world.

Evangelizers, Pope Francis insists, must be guided and strengthened by the Spirit, as their mission would be incomplete without this divine assistance (EG 259). Chapter five ties together the entire vision of evangelization presented in *EG*, underscoring that the Spirit is the source and driving force behind every step of the Church's missionary activity. The final chapter reminds the people that all of these efforts must be empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Pope Francis calls the Church to go out into the world with enthusiasm and compassion, especially toward the poor and marginalized. He encourages a more inclusive and missionary Church that listens, adapts, and engages with the modern world. Central to the message is the idea that true joy comes from sharing the Gospel and living a life of service rooted in Jesus' teachings. This is the missionary option he wants the Church to embrace and embark on.

Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone— A Missionary Option

The world today, as Pope Francis notes in *EG*, is increasingly marked by “desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience” (EG 2). People prioritize material or surface-level desires over moral or emotional growth. This situation leads to fragmentation in oneself, in culture, religion, or ideology. Pope Francis names this “a very real danger” (EG 2). Amid this fragmentation, many individuals find themselves searching for meaning and direction, leading to spiritual emptiness and a crisis of hope. In this context, the light of Christ becomes a powerful beacon, offering clarity, healing, and warmth. The mission of spreading this Light is not confined to a specific time or place but transcends all boundaries, offering hope and truth to a world in need.

Pope Francis in *EG* wishes to “encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy (the joy of the Gospel), while pointing out new paths for the Church's journey in years to come” (EG 1, *italics mine*). One may ask: What is this new chapter? Francis gives the answer: “I dream of a ‘missionary option’, that is, a missionary impulse capable of trans-forming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation” (EG 27). Pope Francis stresses in an interview with Antonio Spadaro SJ, that “the Church today needs the ability to heal wounds and to warm the heart of the faithful.” This is a tremendous statement.

The Society of the Divine Word (SVD), a witnessing community has been a global missionary presence for 150 years, dedicated to spreading the Gospel to all corners of the world. The 150th anniversary theme, “*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*,” encapsulates the SVD’s commitment to universal evangelization, especially in witnessing to the Light anew. This is a missionary option of the SVDs at this time. They opt to share the warmth of the Light and heal the world.

This is time for every missionary disciple to reveal, reflect, and embody the presence of Christ, who is the true Light of the world (cf. John 8:12). In John 1:8, the evangelist speaks of John the Baptist, saying: “He was not the light, but came to testify to the light.” This verse emphasizes humility and purpose: the witness is not the source, but the one who points others toward the Light, Jesus Christ. It is a reminder that authentic evangelization means leading others to Christ, not to oneself. Jesus declares in *John 8:12*, “I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Light, in Scripture, often symbolizes truth, hope, guidance, and life. To say that Jesus is the Light of the world is to affirm that He is the source of all that illuminates the human condition, truth amidst confusion, hope in despair, and life amid spiritual death.

When a Christian bears witness to this Light, they are not the light itself, just as John the Baptist was not, but they become a kind of *lamp* or *mirror*. This reflects beautifully in *John 1:8*, where the evangelist clearly asserts that “he was not the light, but came to testify to the light.” This testifying is at the heart of the Christian mission. It is not self-promotion or personal glory; it is an act of humble pointing, a life that says, “Look, not at me, but at Him.”

To evangelize authentically is to live in such a way that people experience the presence of Christ through the missionaries, not because of eloquence or theological depth, but because of a heart conformed to His. It is about embodied testimony, a life marked by mercy, forgiveness, joy, and peace that cannot be manufactured but only produced by grace. This is what Pope Francis often means when he speaks of missionary discipleship: being so inwardly transformed by an encounter with Christ that one cannot help but go out and share Him with others, not by force or fear, but through the magnetic beauty of a life lived in communion with God.

This is perhaps the most challenging and freeing part of the missionary call: missionaries are not the answer, Christ is. True humility in evangelization recognizes this. It shifts the focus away from personality, charisma, or even strategy, and centers it on witness and love. The image is almost that of a signpost: no one stops to admire the sign itself; the purpose of the sign is to direct attention to the destination. In the same way, the Christian’s life, when lived

in love and truth, becomes a signpost to Christ. And this is what gives evangelization its beauty, it is not about convincing but about *revealing*. Pope Francis repeatedly emphasizes that true evangelization is not about ego, performance, or persuasion, but about being a humble, joyful witness to Christ.

Isaiah 60:1 captures this call in the very interesting words: “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.” It is a command that implies change and a renewed spirit. Isaiah invites the people of Israel to get up and be a light to others, because Yahweh, an Everlasting Light³ is making his home among them. Being a light to other nation is a response to God’s own glory. In the midst of darkness, the people are called to see and believe that God is the fountain of lights and in His Light the people shall see light. In his Light there is a true understanding and purpose and all are called to become a light to others, carrying hope, truth, and salvation into a darkened world.

Isaiah’s call toward the Israelites to rise and shine “is not deliverance from Babylon or from the guilt of sin, but the deliverance into a life empowered by the Spirit of God in which the Light of God is reflected by the people of God.”⁴ Isaiah is talking about a transformation into something new, a life that is not merely free *from* something, but free *for* something. And that *something* is a life fully empowered by the presence and radiance of God. He is envisioning what the people might call a Spirit-filled community, a people whose hearts and lives are illuminated and animated by the *Ruach* (the Spirit) of God. It is about participation—participating in the ongoing mission of God to fill the world with His glory. The people of God are called to rise because the glory of the Lord has risen upon them. Their job is not to manufacture light, but to reflect it, to let it shine through their lives, their worship, their service, and their love.

The vision expressed in Isaiah, of a Spirit-filled community called to *rise and shine* not by producing light, but by reflecting the light and glory of God is echoed powerfully in Pope Francis’ *EG*. The Pope reminds the Church that evangelization is not about imposing but about radiating: “The Church does not grow by proselytism but by attraction” (*EG* 14). Just as Isaiah calls the people to live into their Spirit-empowered identity, Pope Francis calls Christians to live joyfully and missionally, as witnesses who shine with the presence of Christ.

This profound reflection on the theme, “*Witnessing to the Light, from Everywhere for Everyone*,” serves as both a vision and a missionary option

³ Hyun Chul Paul Kim, *Reading Isaiah A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth and Helwys, 2016), 275.

⁴ John N. Oswald, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66* (Michigan, Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 536.

for the SVDs. Rooted deeply in Scripture and echoed in the call of Pope Francis' *EG*, this theme challenges them to embrace their identity not as sources of light, but as joyful, Spirit-empowered reflections of Christ, the true Light of the world. It is an invitation to live out their missionary vocation with humility and purpose—like John the Baptist—not drawing attention to themselves but pointing all people to Jesus. It affirms that evangelization is not about performance or persuasion, but about transformation and testimony. As Isaiah proclaims, the people of God are to rise and shine, not with their own brilliance, but with the radiance of God's glory shining through them.

A missionary option dreamt by Pope Francis is "a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything." It is not a static way of doing mission or in usual sense but rather about a new, more dynamic and transformative. It requires actions. It is, as he says, "an effort to make it more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open" (*EG* 27). A missionary seeking to reach out to others—especially the poor, the marginalized, and those who feel distant from God—participates in what Pope Francis calls 'encounter.' This renewal is about rediscovering the essence of the Gospel and living it in ways that transform individuals, communities, and society. It is called "missionary conversion, capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity" (*EG* 29).

Missionaries need to renew their missionary impulse. Pope Francis offers the reasons why this is needed in today's task of evangelization. "Spirit-filled evangelizers are evangelizers who pray and work" (*EG* 262). The missionaries need to be grounded in God's love as their spiritual foundation in doing mission, focusing especially on the contemplative and spirit-filled dimension of evangelization. He emphasizes that "the primary reason for evangelizing is the love of Jesus which we have received" (*EG* 262). The missionary impulse is rooted in love and the desire to share the Gospel stems from a personal experience of Christ's love. This loving encounter renews their passion to reach others. Prayer is not an escape but a source of strength and passion for mission. Missionaries must be contemplatives, in dialogue with God to remain rooted in God's will.

Openness to the Holy Spirit is the most essential attitude needed for a missionary disciple. The grace of the Holy Spirit will transform the missionaries into "the heralds of God's wondrous deeds, capable of speaking to each person in his or her own language" (*EG* 259). Mary is the model of this openness to the Holy Spirit. She prays with the disciples for the coming of the Holy Spirit and always present in the midst of the people (*EG* 284), and "let herself be guided by the Holy Spirit on a journey of faith towards a destiny of service and fruitfulness" (*EG* 287). The missionaries are invited to follow "a Marian

style of the work of evangelization,” especially focusing on “the revolutionary nature of love and tenderness, humility, able to recognize the traces of God’s Spirit in events great and small, and contemplates the mystery of God in the world, in human history and in daily lives” (EG 288).

In light of Pope Francis’s call for a “missionary option,” a transformative impulse that reorients the Church toward dynamic evangelization rooted in love, openness, and encounter, it becomes clear that this vision resonates deeply with the spirit of missionary renewal being celebrated in the SVDs community. The call to be “Spirit-filled evangelizers” who are grounded in contemplative prayer and radical service reflects not only the essence of the Gospel but also the enduring charism of missionary congregations like the Society of the Divine Word. As the SVDs mark its 150th jubilee, this moment is more than a commemoration of past achievements—it is a profound invitation to embrace anew the missionary option Pope Francis envisions. It is a *kairos* moment, a grace-filled opportunity to discern how the jubilee theme becomes a concrete expression of this renewed missionary spirit, one that seeks to heal, include, and transform in the image of Christ.

The missionary option of the SVDs at this time as persons who come from everywhere is “*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*.” This theme indicates that they have seen and lived in this light and in turn joyfully share it to everyone to warm a cold world. They, once again, remind themselves and the people they serve to leave behind their own comfort zones and move beyond boundaries of self-preservation.

‘*Witnessing to the Light*’ points to the fact that there is a Higher Truth or Higher Presence. All actions of witnessing are directed toward something: “the Light.” This Higher Truth is a profound Light that gives enlightenment, knowledge, true joy and hope, and possesses the grace of transforming individuals and communities.

‘*Witnessing to the Light*’ calls to be the light for others, ‘you are the light of the world,’ (Cf Matt 5:13-16). The people they serve should see the light shines on them first for they are called to be “the light of the world.” When Jesus says this, He is not referring to a physical light but to His presence, truth, and love shining through us. The missionaries are called and meant to radiate His light into a world often marked by darkness, confusion, and suffering. For the Church to truly be light, the light of Christ must first be visible in the lives of its members.

To be the light of the world means to stand as a visible witness of God’s grace, love, and truth in a world that desperately needs it. “In this basic core, what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead” (EG 33). It involves showing

love to the unlovable, offering hope to the hopeless, and guiding others to Christ. This kind of witness is not merely about moral superiority or individual acts of charity; it is about living in a way that others can see the transformative power of Christ in their lives. It is about helping others experience the beauty of His light in ways that draw them closer to Him.

The call to witness to the Light is not passive because it calls the SVDs to engage actively and continuously with the Light and the world around them, whether in their families, communities, or the broader society. This means spending time with God and His Word, and then, in His Light, going out to confront the darkness—whether it be sin, injustice, or despair—with the light of Christ’s truth and love. It calls them to build bridges where there are divides, to offer compassion where there is suffering, to stand firm in their faith where there is opposition and to become light where there is darkness.

A Call to Transformative Evangelization

Pope Francis calls the Church “at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day” (EG 3). The central task of the Church, here is to know Jesus, not as an abstract concept but as living, loving Divine Person, as Light, who goes out and offers Himself to all. The first and most important step toward transformation is remaining faithful to Jesus, listening to Him, and allowing Him to encounter humanity. When the missionaries encounter Jesus, their first proclamation must be “Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you” (EG 27). By echoing this in their witnessing, they bring the Light into the world torn by loneliness and darkness.

Transformation leads to something new, something different. It requires “courage, skill, empathy, character, vision and willingness to sacrifice self for the good of the community.”⁵ It is not for the faint hearted missionaries who prefer to self-preservation and defending status quo but for the one who “start examining the source of their resistance, allowing, encouraging, wrestling with and responding to the confronting questions.”⁶ Transformative evangelization is an active process that challenges missionaries to step beyond their comfort zones.

⁵ Paul Bate, *Strategies for Cultural Change* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1994), 218.

⁶ Graham Hill, *Salt, Light, and a City Introducing Missional Ecclesiology* (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF and STOCK, 2012), 264.

Evangelization, at its core, is about transforming hearts and minds, calling people to a new way of life, often counter to the cultural norms or existing worldviews. The SVDs are asked again and again to step into unfamiliar territories, sometimes even hostile ones, to bring people into one family, and as Pope Francis says, to announce “the Lord, with great respect and love, is also calling you to be a part of his people” (EG 113). This requires courage to face the unknown and sacrifice of their own comforts, safety, or status quo to serve a higher purpose. Evangelization is not for those who prefer to remain in their familiar, comfortable spaces but it is for those willing to risk their own well-being for the greater good of spreading the Gospel. “Life grows by being given away, and it weakens in isolation and comfort. Indeed, those who enjoy life most are those who leave security on the shore and become excited by the mission of communicating life to others” (EG 10). Surely, the SVDs have experienced this joy of leaving their comfort zones behind.

In doing so, they are to live “in fidelity to the example of the Master to preach the Gospel to all: to all places, on all occasions, without hesitation, reluctance or fear. The joy of the Gospel is for all people: no one can be excluded” (EG 23) or in their own word: *for everyone*. Pope Francis stresses that the Gospel must be shared with all people, irrespective of their backgrounds or circumstances. “*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*” speaks to this inclusivity, as it underlines that the message of Christ is universal and meant for all, regardless of race, culture, or religion. The SVD’s dedication to crossing cultural and geographical boundaries and engaging with diverse communities reflects this spirit of inclusive evangelization. It is a call for unity and respect, ensuring that the light of Christ reaches every person, no matter where they are in the world.

“*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*” calls to witness as a community not as a person doing project by himself. “The important thing is to not walk alone, but to rely on each other” (EG 33). According to Pope Francis, this is one of the many challenges in evangelization today. He therefore calls Christians to witness to the Light by offering a radiant and attractive example of fraternal communion: “I especially ask Christians in communities throughout the world to offer a radiant and attractive witness of fraternal communion. Let everyone admire how you care for one another, and how you encourage and accompany one another” (EG 99). He stresses the important of living in the community and caring for each other. This is the key aspect of evangelization; living out the message of Christ in a way that draws others to the faith, not through words but through a caring relationship.

Throughout this year and beyond, the SVDs commit to being the kind of community Pope Francis describes—one that “goes forth, who take the first

step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice” (EG 24). This journey forward indicates an open door where everyone; SVDs and the people they serve, “going out to others in order to reach the fringes of humanity” (EG 46). They are called again and again to the place where the people are far from the center, struggling to be seen and heard by the broader society, to those who are often forgotten or left behind to offer support, empowerment, and sense of belonging.

Pope Francis invites the SVDs to center their proclamation of the Gospel on its core message: “Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen, and free you” (EG 164). It is a deeply personal truth, not just general love for humanity, but a specific, intimate love for each person as an individual. It is an invitation to receive a personal relationship with Jesus — one that is grounded in love, made possible through his sacrifice, and sustained by his living presence in your daily life.

From this basic news of evangelization, Pope Francis gives two sources of Evangelization when he says, “If we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?” (EG 9). First is the personal experience of God, one’s own encounter with God’s love. Evangelization starts with a personal experience—when someone truly receives and feels the transforming love of Jesus. That love brings healing, purpose, and meaning. It is not about rules or ideas first but it is about a relationship that changes everything. Second is the desire to share this love—sharing what one has received. When something beautiful and life-giving happens to a person, they do not want to keep it to themselves, they want others to experience it too. That is the heart of evangelization: it flows from gratitude and joy, not from duty or guilt.

Hence, every Christian, by their baptism, is a missionary disciple because each one has experienced and received the abundant love of God. “In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization” (EG 120). He echoes the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes* “the Church, in its very nature, is missionary.”⁷ The mission is not just something the Church *does*, but it is who she *is*. Every member of the Church shares in this missionary identity.

⁷ Vatican Council II, *Ad Gentes*, no. 2. See also *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 30-33, and *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, nos. 70 and 75.

In *EG*, Pope Francis encourages everyone to reach out to the peripheries, those who are on the margins of society. This mirrors the SVD's mission, as the theme "*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*" emphasizes that no one is excluded from the light of Christ. The SVD's work in often remote, underdeveloped, or marginalized regions exemplifies this outreach. Whether in poverty-stricken communities or areas suffering from conflict, the SVD's mission follows Pope Francis' call to go beyond comfort zones and serve those who are most in need.

Conclusion

The theme of the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the SVDs is aligned with the message Pope Francis wishes to convey in *EG*. "*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*" requires listening to God the Father, to the Divine Word, and to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. "*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*" requires transformation and making an option of missionary service. And it requires consistency.

For the SVDs, this means continuing to be a global, witnessing community that radiates Christ's presence across cultures, nations, and contexts. It means being present among the marginalized, the desolate, and those dwelling in spiritual darkness—not to impose, but to accompany; not to dominate, but to serve; not to shine for themselves, but to reflect the Light of Christ in love, truth, mercy, and hope. This missionary option compels the SVDs to be signs and instruments of God's transforming grace—mirrors of Christ's light in a world yearning for meaning, healing, and peace. It is not a strategy or a project, but a way of being: a missionary discipleship that flows from a deep encounter with the light of Christ and that goes forth joyfully to the ends of the earth, *from everywhere for everyone*.

By embracing this theme, the SVDs seek to witness the Word of God in a renewed way. At the same time, they reflect on their history—how they have encountered the Word, how Jesus fills their hearts with joy, and how they can set new paths for their future journey. This is a "new chapter" for the SVDs. They are called once again to renew their missionary option and to journey together in witnessing to the transformative power of the Light.

I would like to conclude my reflection with the powerful words of Stephen B. Bevans, who offers a new definition of what it means to be a community of missionary disciples—a definition that deeply captures the connection between the jubilee theme and Pope Francis' teaching in *Evangelii Gaudium*. "The church, *the SVD* is a community of missionary disciples. Its

existence deepens on its service to the already-but-not-yet realization of God's dream, working within to better embody and demonstrate it, working to be a credible, united community, working to rekindle faith in those who have strayed, and working among the nations to be the sacrament of God's promised salvation to all of creation. It is a work of witness and proclamation, of celebration and prayer, of justice and peace, of openness and dialogue, of relevant communication, and of loving reconciliation. It is a work inspired by a process that is dialogical and prophetic, respectful and listening, participative and synodal"⁸ (*emphasis added*).

This is what it means to be "*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*." Rooted in their identity as a missionary community, the SVDs are called at this time to witness to the Light everywhere and for everyone—by being a prophetic, dialogical, and united presence in the world, embodying God's dream through faithful service, credible witness, and loving accompaniment of all creation toward healing and hope.

⁸ Stephen B. Bevens, *Community of Missionary Disciples The Continuing Creation of the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Book, 2024), 438.

“Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone” — from a Social Communication Perspective

Tim Norton, SVD

Introduction

When using the term “*Witnessing to the Light*,” we understand that this Light is Christ in the world. Witnessing to the Light or endeavoring to communicate Christ’s presence in our world is the work of every baptized Christian and involves all our efforts whether they are individual or collective, verbal or non-verbal, active or passive.

Our task is to help make present the Kingdom or Reign of God that Jesus came to preach. We live in the tension between the Kingdom’s present manifestation and its future finalization. We experience the blessing and challenges of God’s presence with us in the here and now as we wait in hope for the fullness of the Kingdom that will come at the end of time.

This is well exemplified by Jesus’ parable of the mustard seed, the smallest of seeds, that grows over time into a tree, the largest of trees, which provides abundant space for the birds of air to roost and nest.¹ We think of the small signs of God that herald a future full of life’s blessings.

The importance of the Kingdom of God was helpfully highlighted by Pope Paul VI during Vatican II:

¹ Gospel of Matthew, 13:31 – 32 (NRSV).

Christ first of all proclaims a kingdom, the Kingdom of God; and this is so important that, by comparison, everything else becomes ‘the rest,’ which is ‘given in addition.’ Only the Kingdom, therefore, is absolute, and it makes everything else relative.”²

The clarity of this statement leads us to a more critical reflection of our missionary endeavors in the world. As Christian people on mission, we work hard to build up ecclesial and social ministries that serve all, especially the poor, the “little ones” referred to by Jesus.³ But the original focus of our witness can easily change over time if we are not intentionally faithful to evangelical imperatives. In areas of parish life, education, health care, and social services, we can legitimately ask ourselves if we are witnessing to the Kingdom of God or protecting the reputation of an institution? Are we witnessing to the Light or spending most of our time with people who gift us with the good things of life? Are we witnessing to the Kingdom by promoting mission or are we getting lost in the minutiae of administration? Are we witnessing to the Light or spending time attaining educational qualifications that are little used for the good of God’s people in the world?

Believing in, talking about, and living in ways that we believe help bring about the Kingdom of God are lifelong activities for Christians wishing to deepen their faith. In fact, the whole church has been tasked by Jesus to preach the gospel. So, we need to seek means of communication that not only announce the good news of salvation but do so in ways that people might relate to in their own cultural milieu.⁴

This can be done in a variety of ways that must always take into account the context in which we find ourselves. Communication in the Catholic tradition is not just a transmission of information but is also about the building of relationships that are based on solidarity, truth, and love.⁵

Antonio Pernia talks about reimagining mission in the light of it being not our mission but *missio Dei*, God’s mission. He writes of four required and fundamental shifts in our way of doing mission today so that we can truly reference *missio Dei* with integrity. The four conversions are:

² Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Evangelization in the Modern World, 1975, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html, no. 8.

³ Gospel of Matthew 18:10, 12, 16 (NRSV).

⁴ Paul VI, *Inter Mirifica*, Decree on The Media Of Social Communications, Dec 4 1964, Retrieved June 23 2025 from (https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/docu-ments/vat-ii_decree_19631204_inter-mirifica_en.html, Chap 1, no. 4.

⁵ Jürgen Ommerborn, SVD, “The Role of Communication in the Evangelizing Mission,” Arnold Janssen Secretariat 2020, <https://vivatdeus.org/library/art040/> (accessed June 26, 2025).

- (1) from activism to contemplation;
- (2) from individualism to collaboration;
- (3) from superiority to humility; and
- (4) from only evangelizing to also being evangelized.⁶

From Activism to Contemplation

Much of our personal Christian training and catechesis was about “doing things” or “not doing things” in order to truly call ourselves children of God. We were told to be kind, holy, thoughtful, prayerful, and charitable. We should not lie, hurt others, steal, or speak ill of people. These are useful actions and stances many of us were encouraged to take as children to move towards the goal of holiness.

As the Director of SVD Courses in Nemi, Italy, I was privileged to meet and work with a significant number of SVD confreres who were taking time out of ministry for renewal. In every renewal course we offered a 6- or 8-day silent, guided retreat. For some confreres, liturgical celebrations, recitation of rosaries and other prayers were still the only form of prayer they were comfortable with. In my role as spiritual director, I found that some confreres struggled to move their relationship with God from that of a 7- or 8-year-old child speaking prayers out loud to that of an adult who seeks quiet time (meditation/contemplation) with their God. Harder still for some confreres was considering the idea that their pastoral work and their prayer were intimately related. There was time in their lives for work, and time in their lives for prayer. The journey to connecting their fine pastoral lives with a real discernment process with the Spirit of God was a new journey for some.

To be authentic and adult witnesses to the Light of Christ in the world, we strive to find ourselves on the continuum between active pastoral lives and prayerful contemplation. We are ever vigilant for people who might help us along this path, for example good spiritual directors, strong mentors, decent Christian people from our communities, and our places of work.

Story #1

Due to the halting of international travel during the outbreak of the coronavirus, the in-person General Visitations to SVD provinces, regions, and missions were put on hold. When international travel resumed, some confreres were appointed to assist the General Councilors in the visitations that

⁶ Antonio M. Pernia, “The State of Mission Today,” *Verbum SVD* 55, no. 1 (2014): 9-25.

needed to be completed prior to the end of the 6-year term. In 2021, I was invited to undertake the visitation to ESP, the SVD province in Spain.

During the Visitation, I was inspired through meeting and talking with faith-filled confreres. Some were old, some young. Some were Spanish nationals while a good number came to Spain from other parts of the world. They were involved in a variety of robust and gospel-centered ministries.

I spent two days with a relatively young and multicultural SVD community living and ministering in a poor, urban parish. The confreres related well with each other and had divided their ministry responsibilities which included running a food service for poor families. While some people came in person to collect food, living in a world that was still dealing with trauma from the coronavirus meant that most meals were still being prepared, boxed and delivered principally by volunteers from the parish. This was a lot of work with precious little interaction with the people they served. I deeply appreciated their ministry of relatively anonymous service.

One of the confreres, originally from Southeast Asia, invited me to celebrate in the parish a Mass in the name of the Divine Mercy, then preside over a liturgy of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. There was a small but faithful group of parishioners who participated in both liturgical services and, as I left the Church, a number of them expressed their appreciation of their priest (let's call him Juan) who, in their words, did not yet speak Spanish well, but was a pious and good priest.

The provincial asked Juan to take me downtown on the bus to show me the beauty of this old and historic city. Juan used his best Spanish to point out various landmarks of this wonderful city. While spending time in one of the extremely beautiful churches, Juan spoke passionately with me of the importance of his personal prayer life.

After an hour walking around the historic town, Juan asked if I would accompany him to visit some 'amigos'. Of course I agreed and soon found myself following him down a long flight of stone stairs adjacent to a bridge that spanned a large river that the city was built around. On the path by the river, he introduced me to some homeless people who lived under the bridge. Some were Spanish nationals while others were migrants, both legal and illegal. All of them approached with smiles on their faces, one wanting to show Juan a fish he had caught, another presenting himself wearing a shirt that Juan had obviously gifted him, and a third telling me how much everyone loved 'el cura chino'. (Juan was not Chinese but his misplaced nickname obviously did not concern him). We spent an hour listening and chatting, then climbed the stairs and returned to the community on the bus.

On our journey home, I felt like I was travelling with a reincarnation of St Lawrence, a Spanish deacon ordained in Rome by Pope Saint Sixtus II. In the year 253, Valerian became the Emperor of Rome. Initially he tolerated Christians, but by 257 he issued an edict that started a fierce persecution of the

Church. By this time, Lawrence was an archdeacon and had been put in charge of the Church's material possessions. He was also responsible for distributing alms to the poor. After his arrest, he was told by the emperor to hand over all the riches of the Church. He requested three days to gather the wealth and, during that time, distributed as much as he could to the poor. After three days, Deacon Lawrence appeared again before the prefect and pointed to the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the suffering of Rome, saying, "These are the treasures of the Church."⁷

After wandering the city streets with Juan, viewing many historic and architectural masterpieces, I was taken down by the river to meet the real treasures of that city—the poor and the homeless. Moreover, I was led to consider the critical relationship between the formal liturgies that I had concelebrated with Juan earlier in the day and his witness to a reign of God alive and active with the poor. What Juan was communicating to his friends by the river could not have been done without his dedication to formal acts of prayer, liturgy, and contemplation. I was struck by the fact that Juan, whose language and acculturation skills were still developing, was convinced that his efforts at contemplation were informing his pastoral encounters. And I have no doubt that his pastoral life with the poor under the bridge was having an impact on his contemplative and prayer life.

In our efforts to be communicators, we must not forget the important relationship between the act of witnessing to the Light and the contemplative stance that helps us know how to communicate that Light.

From Individualism to Collaboration

There are times when we erroneously believe that we are the primary agents of communicating the Reign of God to others. While we are generally reluctant to regard ourselves as the best agents of mission, collaborating in that mission can sometimes be seen as a barrier to communicating the Reign of God from everywhere for everyone. This may have its roots in the privileged positions we often hold as educated religious and lay collaborators active in mission in a variety of cultural settings across the world. We may find it tedious to try to work with people who differ from us in gender, age, personality, ethnicity, and nationality as we attempt to witness to the Light and proclaim the Kingdom of God.

⁷ August 10: Saint Lawrence, Deacon and Martyr—Feast, *My Catholic Life: A Journey of Personal Conversion*, <https://mycatholic.life/saints/saints-of-the-liturgical-year/august-10-saint-lawrence-deacon-and-martyr/> (accessed June 24, 2025).

Asking for help in our missionary endeavors is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength. Nevertheless, acknowledging that we cannot do it alone can put us in a vulnerable place and is not an experience we seek willingly. Yet being seen to collaborate across boundaries is a powerful witness to the Light in the here and now. Visible collaboration communicates to people that *missio Dei* is a call to share in God's mission together. We are not called alone but with others who may be different but share a similar call to mission led by God.⁸

Story #2

Prior to joining the SVD seminary I studied and worked as a physiotherapist. As this was a useful skill and a fundamental part of my identity, I requested pastoral placements where I could exercise my profession. I worked in a part time capacity at an Aboriginal Medical Health Centre, in an Aged Care Facility run by the SSpS, and, in my final years of theology, in a prison.

While I had previously treated people with a variety of medical conditions, what struck me most during my time working at Pentridge Prison in Melbourne was the fact that I was often treating men whose injuries were caused by violence. And after treating them, they returned to the same environment that led to the violence in the first place. How was I to communicate the light of Christ in this place?

On one occasion, I was asked to treat a man in solitary confinement. I was escorted to his cell by two prison officers, one of whom said to me, "Make sure you hurt him!" Although I acknowledge that healing treatments can sometimes involve pain, his comment disturbed me.

In the cell, I found a young, shy, grossly overweight man. He winced as he showed me his neck and shoulder injuries caused by prisoners who had been freely allowed to enter his cell and beat him. After laying him face-down on the treatment table, I initiated some shoulder massage and gentle neck mobilization. As often happens when health professionals begin treatment, this young man began to tell me his personal story which was one of significant physical and sexual abuse as a child. He disclosed that he was in prison because he had abused two children.

Although I continued the treatment, I began to feel uneasy. I wondered about the moral implications of healing a man who had injured children. For the first time in my professional life, I was left unsure as to whether I should proceed. Nevertheless, I completed the initial treatment and said I would return later in the week. On the journey home on the bus, my mind and heart were filled with unanswered questions.

When attending my regular Thursday theology class that week, I was still so obsessed with these thoughts that I dared to raise my hand and disclose my

⁸ Pernia, SVD, "The State of Mission Today."

concerns to the (somewhat formidable) lecturer. He instructed all the students (lay and religious, women and men, old and young) to close books and put down pens as we were going to discuss the case that Norton had raised. He then facilitated a 2-hour theological debate in the classroom around my experience and concerns from the prison.

Some students were of the opinion that I should cease treating the young man as they said he did not deserve healing because of his offences against children, while others said that I was morally bound to continue treatment. After all, he was a human being and a child of God. At the end of the class, the lecturer asked how I was going to proceed. I thanked everyone for their input and said that, while I still had work to do on the moral implications of the situation, I was now convinced that I should return to the prison to continue the treatment as that was what I was supposed to do as a professional. If I was measuring access to treatments according to the merits of individuals within the prison walls, then I was in the wrong job and in the wrong place.

I reflected later that I was initially trying to witness to the Light alone. I foolishly and somewhat arrogantly thought I had sufficient experience and wisdom to do so. My initial deep sense of unease showed me that was clearly not the case. Yet, once I made myself vulnerable by articulating my concerns to others for their consideration and input, I felt quite strongly that the Spirit worked through them to help me know how to proceed. And by proceeding, I was in some way being faithful to my Christian mandate to communicate the Reign of God.

The *missio Dei* is just that—God’s mission. Through baptism God calls all of us to participate in the mission of witnessing to the Light that is Jesus in the world. The contexts in which we are called to do this are many and varied, for example with tough and hardened men in prison. What is important to acknowledge is that we are not called alone and that we must make all efforts to collaborate in the communication of this message with people who may be different to us. Communicate the message, we must. And we try to do that with everyone, everywhere; even, and especially, with people who are incarcerated for their actions in the community. We can do it through words, through gestures, through silence, and even through healing touch.

From Superiority to Humility

As we have said before, it is useful to remind ourselves that the mission is *missio Dei*—God’s mission. The Christian gospel is not the possession of any person or any group from a particular time or place. The gospel message is the enduring good news for all people through all time in all contexts. Our passion

to communicate the gospel message leads us to consider carefully first the context in which we find ourselves, then appropriate ways with others to witness to the Light within that context. Pernia reminds us that to witness to the gospel is gift and we are not “the masters” of the gospel, but “stewards” and “servants” of the gospel.⁹

As servants of the gospel, we are sometimes called by God’s Spirit to take risks in our ways of witnessing to the Light. We may be called to step out of our comfort zones, out of our normal routine, into spaces and places that initially seem foreign. This call often comes through an invitation from a source and at a time that is not expected.

Such a call may require of us a re-examination of our status in life, a critique of our fidelity and a willingness to consider again what it is to be a daughter or son of God. We may be called to leave behind parts of ourselves that have defined us in life. These may be aspects of our life that we have worked hard to attain. If we have the courage to respond to such an invitation, the rewards can be both rich and unexpected.

Story #3

Emmanuel City Mission (ECM) was established 2009 by Roby Curtis who was inspired by a pilgrimage to Rome and the work of Mother Teresa and her sisters to begin a Christian outreach service for people living rough on the streets of Brisbane, Australia. With help from friends, he established this ministry in an old paint shop to provide food, clothing, and support to vulnerable and homeless people.¹⁰ With strong and sustained community support from both Christian and non-Christian people, ECM recently moved to a previously vacant building adjacent to an inner-city Catholic parish where it continues to provide a day-sanctuary for vulnerable people. Through time spent at ECM, Roby and I have become firm friends. I was involved in two annual 300km pilgrimages with him along with other ECM Team members and volunteers for awareness-raising and fundraising.

Just two years ago, one of the Team members by the name of Tim was a partner in a respected firm of accountants and consultants in Brisbane. As he tells the story, he was becoming increasingly disenchanted with the corporate life when a Catholic friend told him that ECM was looking for an Operations Manager. Tim gave his friend what he calls a ‘Trinity of reasons’ why he would not be appropriate for such a role, a) he had been working in a cut-throat commercial environment of corporate consulting,

⁹ Pernia, SVD, “The State of Mission Today.”

¹⁰ Emmanuel City Mission, “About Us,” <https://emmanuelcitymission.com/about#:~:text=As%20a%20ministry%20of%20Emmanuel,Merivale%20Street%20in%20South%20Brisbane> (accessed June 27, 2025).

not in charitable works; b) his experience was in finance, not in operations; and c) he had seen vulnerable people begging on the street, but had never worked closely with them. Ignoring Tim's reasons, his friend took his resume and helped him apply for the role. A short time later, Tim was the operations Manager for ECM.

Tim says, despite the steep learning curve and daily challenges that are faced at ECM with some people who are struggling with addictions and/or experiencing the effects of mental health issues, he sensed he was enveloped in a community of love that included both the ECM volunteers and the visitors (those who come with special needs). Tim says that Roby makes it clear that the ministry is one founded on a shared belief in spreading the love of knowing Jesus through relationships with people going through troubled seasons in their lives, seasons that society generally finds difficult to acknowledge and understand.

Even though he had to take a significant reduction in pay, Tim discovered a level of meaning in his new role that he never thought possible. As the community encouraged him, Tim gradually found levels of joy, peace, and fulfillment that he had not experienced before. He began to see that challenges in his personal life gave him a connection to vulnerable people that he had never imagined. He believes he has genuinely seen the face of Jesus in routine encounters at ECM. His question each day now is: How can I be a better witness today to the Christian life I've been gifted? This was never a question Tim asked himself in his previous job.

Tim shared his new life with colleagues from his previous work including Gary (name changed) who was a senior partner seeking to move from his corporate role. Such a process requires an obligatory six-month break before beginning work with a new firm to reduce the risk of information, clients, and staff moving to a competitor firm. Rather than going skiing in the Swiss Alps or travelling through Europe, Gary offered to volunteer for six months in the kitchen at ECM.

In conversations with Tim, Gary says his encounters with vulnerable people at ECM have had a profound effect upon him. Apart from getting to know and care about people he would not have met in his previous life, a deepening self-awareness is helping him better understand and relate to his own family. He is also exploring a renewed relationship with God through the sacraments.

Tim and Gary are not the only ones who have moved from privileged positions (some may call it 'superior' life stances) to places of deeper humility. Some Catholic teachers who volunteered their time at ECM have had similar experiences and have invited their students to volunteer to deepen their sense of Jesus in their lives. The students are helping in the kitchen, in the used clothing section, and in the coffee shop. (Some parents did not allow their children to go to ECM as they feared that environment was too dangerous).

There are now over 30 Christian schools who offer volunteer opportunities at ECM for students. They may not articulate their experience as moving from superiority to humility, but they have taken the opportunity to really encounter vulnerable people that they would otherwise not stop and speak with in the street. During the debrief of their experiences with their teachers, some share they have seen the face of Jesus in people they never would have imagined. One student was heard to remark, “If God exists, He’s right here in this place with these people.” And, interestingly, there are students who have been so touched by their encounters, they have convinced otherwise sceptical parents to come along with them to volunteer so that they also can see the face of Christ. What a wonderful method of witnessing to the Light within the family!

From Only Evangelizing to Being Evangelized

All of us come from a particular cultural context that pervades our bones, our hearts, and our souls. That is not to say that we live out a destiny that is informed only by our first culture. Nevertheless, when many of us entered religious life or marriage or other significant life paths, we were advised to leave behind our past lives. This was poor advice because it is not possible. We cannot leave behind that which the people and the environments of our first cultures have helped us become.

Our learning opportunities and life experiences deepen our understanding of the Gospel and help us modify the person we are so that we can authentically witness to the Light in new times and places. Our first culture will inevitably affect this process, but it should never dictate every aspect of it. For this to happen, we need to be people of ever-deeper discernment around how God calls us to act.

It’s true that it is more comfortable to work and communicate in mission from cultural perspectives that have worked in the past for us in particular places. And it is also true that, occasionally, parts of an idea from one cultural and historical space can be transferred and communicated in another. Nevertheless, if we as witnesses of the Light can be open to make ourselves vulnerable with people by living the tension of not necessarily knowing the way forward, we may find we are shown the way through the local people who are touched by the Spirit and the Word of God.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks of a “new” commandment of love. Jesus does not instruct the disciples to specifically love Him or even to love

God. The commandment is to love one another.¹¹ It is our attempts to love all people everywhere at all times that please God. From the social communication point of view, what better way to communicate the love of God in the world than to let the processes of communication of that love be led by the Spirit through God's people? But, as missionaries, do we have the courage to allow that process to play out?

Story #4

My first assignment as an SVD priest was to a densely populated barrio in Mexico City as the pastor of four communities that were part of a very large and busy parish. Sadly, we were unable to have parish meetings in the evenings as there was a danger of being caught in the crossfire between gangs of armed youths who gathered on street corners, inhaling cheap drugs like paint thinner and glue. Their conflicts often resulted in injuries and deaths.

One afternoon I was called to a 'bendición del cuerpo presente' (funeral in the home) of yet another youth under the age of sixteen who had been shot to death on the streets around the Church the previous night. The humble house and the street were full of family members, neighbors, and friends. I was overcome with sadness during the brief liturgy, and I began to lament openly that we were unable to prevent our young people from killing each other. Only with the help of the choir of young people from the Church and a Eucharistic minister could I continue with the service before the body was carried to the cemetery.

The youth choir members asked what we could do to end this cycle of violence on the streets as they went to school with these boys from the gangs. I told them that, in Sydney, Australia, I was part of a St Vincent de Paul team who walked the city streets at night offering coffee, sandwiches, and conversation to homeless people. They said we should try that. I countered by saying that, even though it worked in Sydney, it was unlikely to work in Mexico City as the situation was very different. Their persistence finally wore me down, so I talked with the parish pastoral council.

The parish council members listened intently as I presented the case for a ministry to the gangs. The president spoke for all when he declared that those "muchachos malos" (bad boys) did not deserve their young people and did not deserve their 'padre' as they would not listen to the Word of God. Besides, it was too dangerous—a fact I had to agree with.

At the next youth group meeting, 14-year-old Juanito said, "¿pero padre, qué haría Jesús?" (What would Jesus do?). When I took Juanito to the next parish pastoral council meeting, I asked him to repeat his question. The councilors knew they were beaten. When they finally agreed to allow the ministry to the gangs to proceed, they insisted on accompanying us.

¹¹ Gospel of John 15:12; 15:17

We met in the Church the following Friday evening where we prayed for the Spirit of God to be with us on our mission of encounter with the young people on the streets. Some men from the Cursillo movement had prepared a tricycle with an enormous pot of sweet, black coffee. Women from the Legion of Mary had prepared many 'tortas' (sandwiches). The youth group was ready to sing. This was a group of some 20 poor parishioners daring to put their faith into action by trying to witness to the Light and take back their streets from the gangs.

At the first corner there was a group of boys swaying under the influence of the drugs they were inhaling from plastic bags. We could see guns casually scattered on the ground beside them. As we got closer, one of the boys ran towards me calling out "Padre Tim!" He gave me a warm 'abrazo' (hug) as the rest of the boys gathered around, also calling my name and hugging me. The parish group shared coffee and tortas.. After 15 minutes of warm conversation and song, we left them. They warned us against meeting other gangs as they were 'los malos' (the bad guys). Nevertheless, we continued our new ministry.

That night we met seven different gangs, all affected by drugs and all in possession of guns. At each encounter we were warmly welcomed, and all the boys seemed to know me. When I asked about this, one told me that I prayed with his dying grandmother while another said I gave first communion to his little sister. A third told me I had baptized his cousin. They were church people.

Within a few weeks the youths asked us to celebrate Mass with them. At the first Mass, most of the boys spontaneously stood before the statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe and promised to give up drugs and be better people. The number of youths attending these celebrations increased with time to over five hundred from many parts of the city. At every Mass, the parishioners did their best to provide simple hospitality and music. Anti-social behavior in the streets decreased significantly to the point that we could once again have evening meetings in the parish. I was told years later on a return visit to the parish that this period of peace lasted seven years.

The parish youth group was particularly buoyed by their part in this ministry. They gleefully told me that, despite being anxious, they always believed this idea would work! But what was very moving for me was the moment the president of the parish council told me he was deeply affected by the question of Juanito. He acknowledged that the *muchachos* were not as bad as he had originally thought. In fact, he said, they were perhaps good boys who had gone astray. He added that he was learning from them about the power of the Virgin of Guadalupe and this unexpected experience had deepened his own faith tremendously.

I had been deeply skeptical about transferring a pastoral strategy from one cultural space and time to another. Our missiological training rightly alerted us to the dangers of a mindset that used only pastoral strategies from foreign lands. Despite the dramatic nature of this social situation in the parish, I was convinced that my original culture in urban Australia could not possibly have any wisdom to share. How wrong I was! What I had not counted on was the faith and creativity of the local people and the youths, and the power of the Spirit in our encounters on the streets.

Conclusion

As baptized people we are obliged to witness to the Light that is Christ in the world. We look for signs of the Reign of God already present in our world and bring these signs to others in the way we share, talk, move, and live. Our context will give us clues as to how, when and where we might communicate this message with joy. We seek to live out this witness in ways that are appropriate and understandable for those around us.

We aim to be active contemplatives in a collaborative effort to communicate the good news with people who already have seeds of the Light in their life experiences. We remember that we do not own the gospel. Indeed, we are just stewards of the gospel. We witness to the Light with hope in the fullness of the Kingdom to come.

Catholic Social Communication as Witnessing to the Light in a Wounded World

Anthony Le Duc, SVD

Pope Leo XIV, in the homily at his installation Mass on May 18, 2025, observed, “In this our time, we still see too much discord, too many wounds caused by hatred, violence, prejudice, the fear of difference, and an economic paradigm that exploits the Earth’s resources and marginalises the poorest.”¹

The words of the Church’s newly elected leader reminded me of the theme of the 19th General Chapter of the Society of the Divine Word: *Your Light Must Shine Before Others: Faithful and Creative Disciples in a Wounded World*,” which took place in Nemi, Italy from June 16 to July 14, 2024. Soon after its Chapter, the missionary congregation also inaugurated the Jubilee Year on September 8, 2024 celebrating the 150th anniversary of its founding with the theme: “*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*.”

As a member of the Society of the Divine Word, these two events hold special significance for me. Therefore, in this essay, I will draw inspiration from these two themes to reflect on the purpose and nature of Catholic social communication in today’s world. The essay will consist of three parts: (1) Setting the scene—the wounds of today’s world; (2) Defining the nature and purpose of Catholic social communication; and (3) Proposing the key elements of Catholic social communication in a wounded world.

¹ Pope Leo XIV, “Homily, Installation Mass,” May 18, 2025, <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/homilies/2025/documents/20250518-inizio-pontificato.html>.

A Wounded World

First, I would like to begin by setting the scene for us—the scene of a wounded world. In the preparation for the General Chapter, local SVD communities throughout the world were asked to identify and reflect on the various wounds on a personal, communal, and global level. In the Final Chapter Document, there are a series of wounds listed:²

Social and cultural wounds: We live in a world marred by systemic inequities, pervasive prejudice, and the overwhelming tides of modern crises—human trafficking, fractured families, and the insidious spread of digital falsehoods. These wounds of our age not only thwart the pursuit of intercultural and interfaith harmony but also corrode the bedrock of traditional values and spiritual support systems. Stripped of these assurances, many people face a situation of social isolation and spiritual desolation, while succumbing to the allure of consumerism and the impact of secularization.

Economic and political wounds: We are inflicted by the deep scars of global inequalities, where unjust economic systems and the relentless exploitation of resources trample upon the rights and lives of indigenous peoples. Corruption and instability cast a heavy shadow causing governments to be paralyzed and communities deprived of the most basic necessities. Amid this turmoil, extremist violence and forced migration disrupt countless lives, leaving refugees in hardship, straining the resources of host nations, and fueling social discord.

Physical and psychological wounds: We witness innumerable situations where substance abuse, alcoholism, and other addictions erode personal and communal bonds. Trauma from violence and loss leads to widespread mental health struggles, while individuals with disabilities often endure silent suffering, facing both physical and emotional challenges in daily life.

Environmental wounds: These wounds result from industrialization and commercial exploitation, which lead to ecological disasters and climate crises. Deforestation, resource depletion, and chemical overuse in agriculture harm human health and the environment. Additionally, prolonged droughts and floods threaten food security, while water scarcity poses an existential threat for many communities.

Wounds in the Church: Moral failings of some of its members, including financial mismanagement, abuse of power, and sexual misconduct, lead to a loss of credibility and declining membership. Secularism and a perceived

² Society of the Divine Word, *Documents of the 19th General Chapter* (Rome: SVD Publications, 2024), 16-19.

detachment of the Church from the lives of people exacerbate these issues, with declining vocations impacting pastoral work, especially in Europe and the Americas. Clericalism fosters an overemphasis on authority, which undermines the priesthood's true mission and limits lay participation. Additionally, ideological divisions create tension and discord within the Church community.

The wounds that afflict our world and Church today are not confined to any one region, community, or group. These pains cross the boundaries of geography, society, gender, and culture. They impact the lives of individuals and communities across the globe. In his homily at the Mass concluding the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on October 27, 2024, Pope Francis exhorted:

We cannot remain inert before the questions raised by the women and men of today, before the challenges of our time, the urgency of evangelization and the many wounds that afflict humanity. Sisters and brothers, we cannot afford to sit back. A sedentary Church, that inadvertently withdraws from life and confines itself to the margins of reality, is a Church that risks remaining blind and becoming comfortable with its own unease.³

Understanding Catholic Social Communication

When we hear the term “social communication,” many of us think of various means of communication such as the internet, television, or the gadgets used in communication. While these are all essential instruments of communication, when we speak of Catholic social communication, we need to go to something deeper and more fundamental than the gadgets and media of communication. We go to the very notion of communication itself! And this deals with theology.

The concept of communication theology in its comprehensive understanding closely corresponds with other sciences, including social communication. This does not necessarily mean that in discussions about communication theology, which also covers social communication, the topic only covers communication media. The concept of communication theology, Franz-Josef Eilers remarked, “does not start with the media or technical means but rather with the center of theology, with God Himself. Communication does become the eye through which the whole of theology is seen because the Christian God

³ Pope Francis, Homily at the Mass concluding the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, October 27, 2024, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2024/documents/20241027-omelia-conclusioni-sinodo.html>

is a communicating God.”⁴ The implication of this concept is that communication is brought into the center of theology, becoming a theological principle. Here, God is taken seriously as a communicating God and both Divine revelation and salvation are considered as communicative happenings. A logical inference within this understanding is that “communication theology considers the whole of theology under the perspective of communication.”⁵

Bernard J. F. Lonergan asserted that communication is a theological concern,⁶ stating that “practical theology is concerned with the effective communication of Christ’s message.”⁷ According to German theologian Gisbert Greshake, “Communication is from its origin a decisive theological idea which grounds in the Christian revelation, which addresses the centres of the Christian perception of God and of the world.”⁸ Greshake espoused on the expression “communication” in the common use of the word, and also in philosophical perspective. The common use of communication, Greshake explained, is derived from the root word *mun*, which means something like that of a threshold or circumscription. This root meaning can be applied to a common room or place for living where everyone depends on everyone else.

The philosophical perspective is based on the Latin word *munus*, which means gift. The expression of communication then refers to the one who communicates as in service to others and passes on to them a gift through which both come into communion. These root words imply that communication is a process of mutual giving which ultimately results in “communion.” Greshake argued that this concept builds on the foundation of the “Trinitarian God who enters into the world and communicates Himself to human beings in Jesus Christ and in the Power of the Holy Spirit.”⁹ In this sense, what God communicates is not something but God’s very Self. Jesus Christ who had a direct encounter with human beings, is the self-communication of God. The Divine self-communication, however, happens primarily in the Trinity. Thus, God’s self-communication is the basis for a special communication theology.

⁴ Franz-Josef Eilers, “Communication Theology: Some Considerations,” in Franz Josef Eilers, ed. *Church and Social Communication in Asia: Documents, Analysis Experiences*. 2nd ed. (Manila: Logos Publications, Inc., 2008), 174.

⁵ Virgilio F. Ciudadano, Jr, *Social Communication Formation in Seminaries and Schools of Theology: An Investigation* (Manila: Logos Publications, Inc., 2015), 107.

⁶ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 255.

⁷ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 362.

⁸ Quoted in Anh Vu Ta and Franz-Josef Eilers, eds., *Social Communication in Theological Perspective: Communication Theology* (Manila: Logos Publications, Inc., 2015), 47.

⁹ Quoted in Anh Vu Ta and Franz-Josef Eilers, eds., *Social Communication in Theological Perspective*, 48.

The notion of God's self-communication has been extensively developed by Karl Rahner to articulate how God reveals Godself to humanity through grace, culminating in the person of Jesus Christ, and to show that human beings are inherently oriented toward this divine self-revelation.¹⁰ According to Karl Rahner, God communicates Godself as a person who is both gift and giver, embodying perfect love. In this self-communication, Rahner explained, "the giver in his own being is the gift," such that God's very being becomes constitutive of human existence through what he describes as a relation of formal causality.¹¹ Rahner remarked that "the term 'self-communication' is really intended to signify that God in his own most proper reality makes himself the innermost constitutive element of man."¹² In other words, God doesn't just communicate information or blessings to us. God gives God's self to us, entering into our deepest core, and this relationship with God becomes part of our very identity as human beings.

Elements of Communication Theology

As stated above, the mystery of God's self-communication is manifested especially through the Trinity, Revelation, and Incarnation.

Firstly, *Trinity*. Greshake characterized the Trinitarian God as follows: "God is the one who is not a static, lonely nomadic. Rather, God is in himself plural: Life, Love and Communio."¹³ Thus, "God is those communio in which the three divine persons carry out the one divine life as mutual self-communication in the threefold interaction of love."¹⁴ Within this circle of relationship, the Father sends the Son and the Holy Spirit, who themselves possess the same Divine nature.

Through this moment, Franz-Josef Eilers noted, "The Father 'speaks' the Son and in so doing He generates and communicates everything He is and He has," and in turn, the "Son calls the Father and gives Himself in totality with perfect obedience."¹⁵ In the same line of understanding, Carlo Martini wrote, "The intimate life of God as far as we can comprehend is a profound and on-going inexhaustible communication between the Divine persons."¹⁶ In other

¹⁰ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1997).

¹¹ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 121

¹² Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 116

¹³ Quoted in Anh Vu Ta and Franz-Josef Eilers, *Social Communication in Theological Perspective*, 48.

¹⁴ Gilberts Greshake, *Eine Trinitarische Theologie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1997), 179.

¹⁵ Franz-Josef Eilers, *Communicating in Community: An Introduction to Social Communication* (Manila: Logos Publications, Inc., 2009), 46.

¹⁶ Quoted in Eilers, *Communicating in Community*, 46.

words, there is an ongoing perpetual dialogue between the three divine persons.

Secondly, *Revelation*. The Christian understanding of God's self-communication is based on God's character as a God who relates and communicates with God's creatures. The Vatican II document on Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, states, "Through divine revelation, God chose to show forth and communicate Himself and the eternal decisions of His will regarding the salvation of men. That is to say, He chose to share with them those divine treasures which totally transcend the understanding of the human mind" (DV 6). Therefore, the entire Scripture speaks about God as a communicating God—a God who shares and reveals Godself with God's creatures. The Old Testament shows the inner Trinitarian self-communication of God involved in God's dialogue with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This communicative action of God is also echoed in the New Testament.

The theme surrounding the Pentecost event, the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-47) is considered as God communicating yet again with human beings. The communicative occurrence of Pentecost is derived naturally from the Trinitarian communion of love. That is, the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit are unified in the circumference of Divine communication. The quintessence of God, as pointed out by Martini, in fact, is both "communion and communication."¹⁷ The Pentecost event, therefore, signifies a precious moment of God's outpouring of the Holy Spirit which gives people a profound communicative ability. It was also a moment through which God re-initiated and restored the divine-human relationship, marked by the gratuitous outpouring of the same Holy Spirit.

On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit filled each of the disciples with the gift of speaking in tongues. It gave them the ability to be understood in different languages spoken by people all over the world. In other words, Pentecost fulfills Jesus' promise and marks the birth of the Church, initiating its mission of communication, as the Holy Spirit empowers the disciples to restore true and authentic communication among humanity, overcoming the division caused at Babel.¹⁸

Pentecost, in this context, would be nothing but communication, and the main mission of the Church, therefore, is to communicate the gospel message in the here and now of every time. God's intervention through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost characterizes the Church which has been

¹⁷ Carlo Maria Martini, *Communicating Christ to the World* (Diliman: Claretian Publications, 1994), 21

¹⁸ Anh Vu Ta, "Communication Theology for Pastoral Communication as a New Approach," *Asian Horizons* 5, no. 3 (September 2011): 454.

established by God's own self and that the Spirit, who commanded the disciples, enables the Church to communicate and bear witness to the gospel until the end of time. The gift of God's Spirit would give the Church of the contemporary age a new heart, a new language, and a new ability to communicate. Such is the fulfilment of God's enduring presence in our midst through the Church's life and proclamation of the Gospel.

Finally, *Incarnation*. The Biblical underpinning of the Christian communication is the Trinitarian communication. The Trinitarian communion shows an ongoing-permanent communication between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father communicates constantly to the Son and the Son, in total obedience, communicates everything of what He has heard from His Father to the world. The Logos (Son) communicated perfectly and successfully the message of the Father to the world and the people; and therefore, Jesus is known as the Perfect Communicator of God. Carlo M. Martini asserted:

In the Incarnation and in the paschal mystery we come to know the Son whom St. Ignatius of Antioch calls "the Word proceeding from silence." It is he in whom the Father (the Silence, the hidden mystery who is the origin of communication) expresses himself and makes himself known. In his whole life, Jesus did not want to do anything else as revealing the Father: "I have revealed your name to men" (Jn 17:6).¹⁹

Thus, Jesus' fundamental mission on earth was to reveal the face of the Father, in other words, to reveal to humanity God's love for the world. The author of the fourth Gospel affirms the biblical foundation of Jesus as the sole revealer of the Father, stating: "No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is the Father's side, has revealed Him" (John 1:18). The source of Jesus' love for humanity comes from the Father's love through the Trinitarian relationship. The love of the Father thus becomes flesh in the Incarnation of the Son. The Father, who is love, sends the Word, a Word which communicates the love and the very self of God. As the sole revealer of the Father, Jesus does not simply communicate the concepts or ideas and instructions to His listeners. Jesus' communication indeed, as described eloquently by the Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio*, is "more than the expression of ideas and the indication of emotion. At its most profound level, it is the giving of self in love."²⁰

¹⁹ Carlo Maria Martini, *Effata "Apriti"; Il Lembo del Mantello* (Milano: Centro Ambrosiano di Documentazione e Studi religiosi, 1990), no.25.

²⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Communio et Progressio*, 1971, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_23051971_communio_en.html, no. 11.

How did Jesus, as the perfect revealer of the Father, communicate this “giving of self in love” in His mission? The Gospel of Mark shows us the spiritual life of Jesus, in and through which, He revealed the love of the Father. “Rising very early before dawn, He left and went off to a deserted place, where He prayed” (Mk. 1:35). Other Gospel accounts relate that Jesus would solemnly pray before making important decisions in His life. This way of prayerful communication with the Father was taught to his disciples by Jesus as well (Mt. 6:9-15). In His profoundest belief, Jesus, through constant prayer, received the Love of the Father and thus received the spiritual nourishment for His mission to communicate the Good News to the people.

Church as Communication

Avery Dulles, building on Karl Rahner’s profound thought on God’s self-communication, characterized Christianity as “first and foremost the religion of communication.”²¹ This insight arises from the understanding that God, in the mystery of the Trinity, is a dynamic of self-giving love that reaches outward toward humanity.²² As such, the Christian faith—centered on this self-revealing God—is inherently communicative, oriented toward sharing the divine life and the message of salvation with the world. This perspective underscores the fundamental role of communication in grasping both the nature of God and the core identity of the Christian faith. Because Christianity is a religion of communication, Dulles concluded that the Church is likewise communication.²³ Dulles envisioned the Church as “a vast communication network designed to bring men out of their isolation and estrangement and to bring them individually and corporately into communion with God in Christ.”²⁴

Two approaches of communication theology, to expound the concept on a more practical level, are known as pastoral and evangelizing communication. Pastoral communication is the communication *ad intra* for the Christian community and the Church. The understanding of pastoral communication is part of pastoral theology which refers to the application of theology to the lives of people and society as seen and manifested in the preaching, catechetical,

²¹ Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System* (Dublin: Crossroad, 1992), 38.

²² Dulles, *The Craft of Theology*, 22.

²³ Avery Dulles, *The Church is Communication* (Rome: Multimedia International, 1972), 6.

²⁴ Avery Dulles, “The Church and Communication,” in Avery Dulles, *The Reshaping of Catholicism: Current Challenges in the Theology of Church* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 110.

Biblical as well as the liturgical apostolates of the Church. The concept of pastoral communication, in fact, derives from the word “pastor” or the shepherd himself who shares with and relates to his flock using different methods, means, and contents in his communication. Within this framework, “pastoral communication is communicating for pastoral care, shepherding, building up, maintaining and deepening of faith.”²⁵ In a strict sense, pastoral communication is communication for and with the members of the Church. In a broad sense, it refers to all activities of the Church and its members.²⁶

Evangelizing communication, on the other hand, is communication *ad extra* aimed at those outside the Church, especially those who have not been baptized or who have not known Christ yet. The Church exists not only for the community of believers but is also sent to share and proclaim the Good News to all the world. Thus, the way the Church carries out its mission with the people outside or at the margins of the Church reflects the endeavor to communicate the Kingdom of God beyond the narrow Church boundaries. Its fundamental concept lies on the “kerygmatic, proclaiming or missionary communication,”²⁷ in which dialogue is seen as an essential part. Dialogue, in the light of evangelizing communication, is “the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission, as well of every aspect of it, whether one speaks of simple presence and witness, service, or direct proclamation. Any sense of mission not permeated by such dialogical spirit would go against the demands of true humanity and against the teaching of the Gospel.”²⁸ The landmark document *Nostra Aetate* affirms the importance of dialogue with other religions as a way of evangelizing communication. This document provides a sense of prophetic imperative for Catholics to promote the spiritual values seen in other religious traditions such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. It also inspires a humbler, yet creative way to speak with integrity of what God has revealed to human beings. Although *Nostra Aetate* does not ignore the substantial differences between Catholicism and other faiths, the document attempts to give proper attention to the characteristics that the various religious traditions have in common.

²⁵ Virgilio F. Ciudadano, Jr, *Social Communication Formation in Seminaries and Schools of Theology: An Investigation* (Manila: Logos Publications, Inc.), 14.

²⁶ Franz-Josef Eilers, *Communicating in Ministry and Mission: An Introduction to Pastoral and Evangelizing Communication* (Manila: Logos Publications, Inc., 2003), 34.

²⁷ Eilers, *Communicating in Ministry and Mission*, 210.

²⁸ Secretariat for Non-Christians, “The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflection and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission,” quoted in Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission For Today* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2004), 378.

Catholic social communication, whether pastoral or evangelizing, serves a fundamental purpose: to foster human progress and promote genuine communion among people. As articulated in *Communio et Progressio* (1971), this mission seeks to accelerate all forms of human development and enhance co-operation until true fellowship is achieved.”²⁹ Communication in the Catholic tradition is not merely about transmitting information but about building relationships rooted in truth, love, and solidarity. Whether proclaimed from the pulpit, shared in the marketplace, broadcast over radio waves, or disseminated through digital platforms, its purpose remains unchanged—to cultivate unity, inspire mutual understanding, and bear witness to the Gospel in ways that speak to the heart of human experience.³⁰ In an era of deep social fragmentation and global crises, Catholic social communication continues to be a vital instrument for healing wounds, bridging divides, and fostering a more just and compassionate world.

Catholic Social Communication in the Present Milieu

In the work of social communication, the Church through its various individuals and means has to continually discern the signs of the times and impart its wisdom that addresses contemporary concerns. Here, I propose six key elements involved in social communication. These six elements are not exclusive of one another but intertwining, often overlapping and reinforcing of one another. For the sake of brevity in this essay, I will only go through each element in a brief manner.

Communicating Prophetically

In the 2023 World Communication Day Message, Pope Francis wrote, “I dream of an ecclesial communication that knows how to let itself be guided by the Holy Spirit, gentle and at the same time, prophetic, that knows how to find new ways and means for the wonderful proclamation it is called to deliver in the third millennium.”³¹ In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the prophet stands as a voice of divine urgency—a bearer of messages not born of human will but inspired by God. To be prophetic was to walk a perilous path, speaking truth in times of denial and calling a forgetful people back to the heart of their covenant. Essential to the prophet’s mission was oftentimes an unwavering

²⁹ *Communio et Progressio*, no. 73

³⁰ *Communio et Progressio*, no. 1.

³¹ Pope Francis, WCD Message, 2023, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/20230124-messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html>

summons to repentance: a plea to abandon idols, to shun injustice, and to cleanse the moral decay that had taken root in the soul of the people. However, the prophet did not merely warn; he wept, pleaded, and proclaimed, often to an audience unwilling to listen. His words were edged with judgment but rooted in the hope of return. Jeremiah, among the most anguished of these voices, stood before Israel and foretold the bitter cost of unfaithfulness—the looming shadow of Babylonian exile (Jeremiah 25:1–14), not as punishment for its own sake, but as consequence and wake-up call.

Another significant aspect of prophetic activity was the advocacy for social justice. Prophets spoke out against oppression, exploitation, and inequality, reminding their listeners that true worship of God includes just and compassionate treatment of others. The prophet Amos was well-known for his denunciations of social injustice and his call for justice to “roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). Likewise, Isaiah declared God’s disdain for hollow religiosity devoid of ethical integrity. “Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow,” (1:17) Isaiah commanded.

While forthtelling—addressing present moral conditions and social realities—was a central task of the prophets, they also engaged in foretelling, revealing future events tied to God’s plans for judgment and redemption. These forward-looking messages were not detached predictions; they reinforced the urgency of repentance and highlighted the consequences of human actions. Prophecies about the coming Messiah, such as those found in Isaiah and Micah, offered hope of future restoration and salvation (Isaiah 7:14; 9:6–7; Micah 5:2). This dual function of addressing the present while pointing toward the future adds depth to the prophetic role, linking current behavior with long-term consequences and divine promises.

In today’s wounded world, prophetic communication continues to call for truth-telling, especially in the face of systemic injustice. It challenges structures of power and advocates for those pushed to the margins, reminding us that faithfulness to God includes a responsibility to seek justice and uphold human dignity. Pope Paul VI stated in the 1971 WCD Message, “the Church is conscious of being a prophetic sign of unity and peace for the entire world.”³² This requires us to confront the root causes of suffering, such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation, and to call for a more just and equitable society. By drawing inspiration from the prophetic tradition, we can become agents of change, working towards a world where God’s love and justice prevail.

³² Pope Paul VI, World Communication Day Message, 1971, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_p-vi_mes_19710325_v-com-day.html.

Communicating Faithfully and Creatively

In the SVD Chapter document, there is an emphasis on becoming faithful and creative disciples. Catholic communicators are first and foremost disciples. Witnessing to the Light has to stem from genuine faith. The vocation of a Catholic communicator is not founded on human wisdom or worldly power but on faith—faith in the truths received through Christ. We are called to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ with confidence, anchored in His promises.

The term “Light” in the Jubilee theme refers to none other than Christ, the Incarnate Word. Our witness must flow from this deep well of faith, led by the Holy Spirit, and grounded in the teachings of the Church and our personal relationship with Christ, who shapes our life, vocation, and mission. According to Father Superior General Anselmo Ricardo Ribeiro, “To become faithful disciples, we need to deepen our Trinitarian and missionary spirituality.” Moreover, he remarked, “Being a faithful disciple is a gift and task. It is a joyful and responsible vocation. Healing the wounds and bringing light to the world, portraying the Light of Christ express the commitment of a faithful disciple.”³³

In his address to the SVDs on June 28, 2024, Pope Francis said: “All of the baptized are called to be missionary disciples, and fidelity to this vocation, always by the grace of God, is our commitment. Faithful disciples are recognized by the joy of the Gospel that lights up their face, from the way they live their life and thus transmit to others the love that they first received and continue to receive anew each day.”³⁴

Thus, it is imperative that Catholic communicators love both the Word of God *and* God of the Word. Particularly for the members of the Society of the Divine Word, it has been emphasized in the last two Chapters that “our name is our mission.” Incidentally, when Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, former President of FABC and archbishop of Yangon Diocese invited the SVDs to serve in Myanmar, he specifically wanted us to start a Biblical apostolate in his diocese, simply because we are the Society of the Divine Word. The mission imperative and direction is embedded in our name, as he saw it!

Effective Catholic social communication also needs to be creative. Creativity is necessary to connect meaningfully with a diverse, global audience facing unprecedented social and cultural changes. Despite the desire for connectedness, in our hyperconnected world, many people today feel isolated, disoriented, and detached from society, from traditional faith communities,

³³ Society of the Divine Word, *Documents of the 19th General Chapter* (Rome: SVD Publications, 2024), 6.

³⁴ Society of the Divine Word, *Documents of the 19th General Chapter*, 70.

and the digital environment often heightens this sense of disconnection. Many marginalized groups such as undocumented migrant workers, political asylum seekers, and LGBTQ+ groups are forced to congregate in digital niches in order to have safe spaces for exchange and mutual support.

Creativity in communication allows faith communicators to engage with these individuals in ways that resonate, offering them a path to encounter Christ amid their doubts, desires, and everyday challenges. This is part of the synodal way in which the voices of all people are important, may they be expressed in meetings convened by the diocesan bishops or in digital spaces where there is no apparent authority figure. Only when the Church is willing to listen to all voices can it decipher accurately and fully the *sensus fidelium* of the People of God today.

In an age where information is instant and abundant, but truths are scarce, creative Catholic communication can break through the noise to present faith in a way that is both compelling and relevant. Pope Francis called on communicators to “search for an open and creative style of communication that never seeks to glamourize evil but instead to concentrate on solutions and to inspire a positive and responsible approach on the part of its recipients.”³⁵

Fortunately, “examples of faithful and creative engagement on social media abound around the world, from both local communities as well as individuals who give witness to their faith on these platforms, oftentimes more pervasively than the institutional Church.”³⁶ However, in order to address the many wounds today, as Fr Ribeiro exhorted, we must “be active, vigilant, innovative, hardworking, searching for new answers, finding new paths.”

Communicating as “People on the Ground”

In Vietnamese, there is an expression: “Riding the horse to admire the flowers.” It describes a situation in which someone moves quickly through an experience, seeing much but understanding little—engaging only on a surface level. Objectively, it may reflect a lack of access or opportunity for deeper engagement, resulting in a missed encounter with the substance, meaning, or transformative potential of the experience.

Subjectively, it can also point to a deliberate stance: a reluctance to get close, to invest time, effort, or emotional and intellectual energy in truly

³⁵ Pope Francis, World Communication Day Message, 2017, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20180124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html.

³⁶ Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence: A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media*, 2023, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/dpc/documents/20230528_dpc-verso-piena-presenza_en.html, no. 2.

understanding a reality. In other words, they don't want to get their shoes dirty having to wade in the field.

In Thailand where I am working, Buddhist monks traditionally go into towns each day to collect alms. This daily ritual, which takes place in various contexts—bustling city streets, quiet rural villages, and lively market squares—not only provides monks with sustenance but also reinforces the close connection between the monastic community and laypeople. As monks walk in their saffron robes, the act of giving fosters mindfulness and reflection among donors, transforming the exchange into a moment of shared spirituality that embodies compassion and interdependence. Beyond the spiritual dimension, as they walk the roads, monks have the opportunity to observe the livelihoods and struggles of those they serve, particularly due to the impact of environmental degradation and societal changes.

Through this “on the ground” experience of witnessing the impacts of climate change, deforestation, and pollution on local landscapes and people's livelihoods, they can incorporate these urgent issues into their meditation and sermons. As people deeply embedded in the community and literally touching the ground of the earth with their bare feet, monks can also draw on local examples and cultural practices to make their messages relatable and actionable.

Communicating as “people on the ground” means speaking in a contextually relevant manner. Being a witness to the Light is not merely about proclaiming doctrine; it is about making the Light visible and transformative in the community we serve. This calls for us to engage with others in dialogue. In the first 59 WCD messages, there is a great emphasis on dialogue as an essential aspect of communication. The term has appeared 100 times in all the messages.

In the 2025 message coinciding with the Jubilee Year of Hope, Pope Francis wrote, “The Jubilee reminds us that those who are peacemakers ‘will be called children of God’ (Mt 5:9), and in this way it inspires hope, points us to the need for an attentive, gentle and reflective communication, capable of pointing out paths of dialogue.”³⁷ In his address to representatives of the media a few days after his election, Pope Leo XIV reminded his listeners that “communication is not only the transmission of information, but it is also the creation of a culture, of human and digital environments that become spaces for dialogue and discussion. In looking at how technology is developing, this mission becomes ever more necessary.”³⁸

³⁷ Pope Francis, World Communication Day Message, 2025, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/20250124-messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html>.

³⁸ Pope Leo XIV, Address to Representatives of the Media, May 12, 2025, <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/speeches/2025/may/documents/20250512-media.html>

Dialogue includes both listening and speaking. Pope Francis called for listening and speaking with the heart. He wrote, “We all have ears, but many times even those with perfect hearing are unable to hear another person. In fact, there is an interior deafness worse than the physical one. Indeed, listening concerns the whole person, not just the sense of hearing. The true seat of listening is the heart.”³⁹ The same disposition is also needed for speaking, especially speaking the truth in love, as St Paul exhorted Christians in his community to do (Eph 4:15). Thus, “We do not need loud, forceful communication, but rather communication that is capable of listening and of gathering the voices of the weak who have no voice,” said Pope Leo XIV.⁴⁰

To effectively communicate with others, we need to be fully present, to be people on the ground, in order to be with others in their joys and sorrows, sharing in their lived experiences and fostering a genuine connection rooted in compassion and understanding. The document on social media engagement “Towards Full Presence” of the Dicastery for Communication says that full presence doesn’t have to be confined to physical space only. Presence can be achieved in digital spaces as well. More than ever, digital spaces have gained anthropological meaning because they are the places where people congregate and live out their lives—seeking companionship and friendship, making friends and creating enemies, engaging in debates and dialogue, committing sins and seeking forgiveness.

Catholic communicators, whether bishops, priests, or lay pastoral agents, need to be present in those spaces with the people in order to understand real world realities and make appropriate contextual responses to each particular situation. “Towards Full Presence” affirms that the faithful want Church leaders to be present to them in digital spaces and platforms.⁴¹ Unfortunately, for many leaders and pastoral agents in the Church, when it comes to digital presence, too many are still riding horses rather than immersing themselves in the digital field where the people are gathering and living. For too many, these digital spaces are too messy, too chaotic, or too undignified for them to wade into from their highly respected ecclesial positions.

Communicating to Inspire

In the homily in the Mass at the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Leo XIV declared:

³⁹ Pope Francis, World Communication Day Message, 2022, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/20220124-messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html>.

⁴⁰ Pope Leo XIV, Address to Representatives of the Media, May 12, 2025.

⁴¹ Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence*, no. 1.

For our part, we want to be a small leaven of unity, communion and fraternity within the world. We want to say to the world, with humility and joy: Look to Christ! Come closer to him! Welcome his word that enlightens and consoles! Listen to his offer of love and become his one family: in the one Christ, we are one. This is the path to follow together, among ourselves but also with our sister Christian churches, with those who follow other religious paths, with those who are searching for God, with all women and men of good will, in order to build a new world where peace reigns!⁴²

Catholic social communication as witnessing to the Light is about creatively inspiring others. The role of the speaker is not just to impart information but to become a transformative force that illuminates an eschatological perspective. Inspiring communication highlights and points to the vision of the future and bring to expression the new realities against the more visible ones of the old order. According to Protestant theologian Walter Brueggemann, “Energizing is closely linked to hope. We are energized not by that which we already possess but by that which is promised and about to be given.”⁴³ Energizing communication opposes the mindset that genuine transformation is illusory. By proclaiming transcendental promises and calling for radical shifts in attitudes and behaviors, Catholic social communicators can inspire communities to envision and work toward transformative futures. Proclaiming to inspire includes moving away from the status quo and presenting new visions that align with God’s plan of salvation.

Proclaiming the Good News about Christ, about His incarnation and His Paschal mystery, is aimed at inspiring people to recognise the possibility of a new heaven and a new earth—a completely new order, not just a rearrangement of the old. This requires a fundamental shift in attitude and behaviour, especially in our relationships with one another, indeed with all creation. Crucially, this involves fostering a culture of encounter, where genuine dialogue and mutual respect are prioritized. Pope Francis said, “Good communication helps us to grow closer, to know one another better, and ultimately, to grow in unity.”⁴⁴ In an age where the advance in communication technology increasingly causes individual isolation, group siloization, and social and ecclesial polarization, it is imperative that Catholic communication inspires people to live out the three fundamental relationships—with God, with fellow human beings, and with creation—in a more interconnected and holistic way.

⁴² Pope Leo XIV, “Homily, Installation Mass,” May 18, 2025, <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/homilies/2025/documents/20250518-inizio-pontificato.html>

⁴³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (MT, Fortress Press, 2001), 14.

⁴⁴ Pope Francis, World Communication Day Message 2014, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20140124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html.

Whether in digital spaces or physical places, Catholic communication intentionally orients people “towards encountering real persons, forming real relationships and building real community.”⁴⁵ On a practical level, inspiring communication involves embracing diverse perspectives and empowering marginalized voices. Engaging with scientists and experts of various fields in an interdisciplinary manner enhances the credibility, effectiveness, and reach of Catholic communication. For example, when speaking on the subject of care for creation, Pope Francis paid particular attention to incorporating the voices of climate scientists, of Indigenous peoples, of influential figures from other religious traditions, and the groans of the Earth and the poor.⁴⁶

Catholic social communication, in the synodal model, must adopt a “with” rather than “for” approach in addressing the wounds in the world. This means dialoguing with those most impacted by societal problems, especially women, children, and the poor. These vulnerable groups must be empowered to be part of the solutions rather than having solutions imposed on them without consultation.

Communicating to Denounce or Challenge

The document *Ethics in Communication* declares, Christian communicators have “a prophetic task, a vocation: to speak out against the false gods and idols of the day—materialism, hedonism, consumerism, narrow nationalism...”⁴⁷ Catholic social communicators can use their voices to denounce negative realities, or in the words of the Asian bishops (FABC), “death-dealing realities”. Witnessing to the Light requires courage in confronting the dark realities of the world. This involves speaking truth to power. “Truth” here is the eternal truth of Christ—the person of Christ and the Gospel proclaimed by Christ.

Nowadays, we often hear things like “I’m speaking my truth,” or “She is speaking her truth,” or “You have the right to speak your truth.” I think this way of using the word “truth” is very problematic. If everyone has their own truths, then what is truth? Truth becomes subjective and fragmented, and holds no more weight than an opinion, thus losing its universal and transformative power. I understand that not all “truths” are created equal, and that there are various levels of truths, or “truthiness”. I also understand that individual

⁴⁵ Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence*, no. 24.

⁴⁶ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

⁴⁷ Vatican, *Ethics in Communication*, 2000, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20000530_ethics-communications_en.html, no. 31.

opinions are valuable and need to be respectfully heard. However, if we are not careful, this relativistic approach can undermine the pursuit of genuine understanding and justice, as it prioritizes individual perspectives over a shared foundation of moral and spiritual truth. In a homily in 2005, Pope Benedict XVI, just before his election to the papacy, said:

We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires. We, however, have a different goal: the Son of God, the true man. He is the measure of true humanism. An 'adult' faith is not a faith that follows the trends of fashion and the latest novelty; a mature adult faith is deeply rooted in friendship with Christ. It is this friendship that opens us up to all that is good and gives us a criterion by which to distinguish the true from the false, and deceit from truth.⁴⁸

Catholic social communicators, to use Pope Leo XIV's words, are "in service to the truth,"⁴⁹ and are called to rise above this subjectivity. Pope John Paul II remarked that "they have the duty and privilege to declare the truth—the glorious truth about human life and human destiny revealed in the Word made flesh."⁵⁰ They must courageously proclaim the objective truths of the gospel—truths that transcend personal opinions and provide a unifying vision for humanity. In doing so, they illuminate paths toward hope, reconciliation, and authentic freedom in a world often clouded by confusion and division.

This form of communication, especially in its prophetic manner, often involves speaking against the moral evil and apostasy of the world and societies. Central to denouncing communication is the imperative to confront structures of authority that perpetuate injustice and inequality. Catholic critics hold those in power accountable to moral standards derived from Catholic social teachings and universal human rights principles. They challenge narratives, policies, and practices intended to obscure, distort, and hide the truth while perpetuating inequality, marginalisation, oppression, and environmental destruction. In doing so, Catholic communicators uphold the Gospel values of justice, compassion, and solidarity, especially with the poor and vulnerable. The Nobel Peace Prize winner, journalist Maria Ressa, in her address at the Jubilee of the World of Communications on January 25, 2025, said faith communicators must "speak truth with moral clarity....Whether it's systemic racism, economic inequality, or the erosion of democratic norms, people of

⁴⁸ Mass «Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice»: Homily of Card. Joseph Ratzinger, https://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html

⁴⁹ Pope Leo XIV, Address to Representatives of the Media, May 12, 2025, <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/speeches/2025/may/documents/20250512-media.html>

⁵⁰ Pope John Paul II, World Communication Day Message, 2001.

faith must reclaim their prophetic voice. Demand transparency and accountability from those who control our public information ecosystems—from governments to Big Tech to media.”⁵¹

Communicating through Witnessing Action

Communication takes place verbally and nonverbally. Therefore, witnessing to the Light always includes the witness of action. There is a familiar saying attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words.” Of course, proclaiming the Good News through words is indispensable, but the life of the witness must be a living testimony of the gospel they preach. In many cultures, non-verbal communication plays a significant role in conveying a message. Therefore, gestures and actions often convey things that words alone cannot.

In the context of Catholic social communication, it is not just about the gestures but action. St Teresa of Avila pointed out that Christ no longer has a body but ours. Indeed, our eyes are the eyes through which He looks at each person with love and compassion. Our hands are the hands through which He soothes and heals the wounds of others. Our feet are the feet through which He reaches out to the poor, the forgotten by society, and the sinners who are lost.

Our everyday actions in choosing our mode of transportation when going about, the accessories we wear on our body, the electronic gadgets we own, the clothes we wear, the food we eat, and so on also possess tremendous communicative power that cannot be underestimated or overlooked. We saw this in Pope Francis’ visit to Southeast Asia in 2024. Pope Francis’ choice of a simple, everyday vehicle during his visit to Jakarta, Indonesia in September 2024 as part of his four country Apostolic visit to Asia reflected his commitment to a life of humility and simplicity. Rather than accepting the planned motorcade and luxurious accommodations offered by the Indonesian government, the pope opted to travel in a modest white Toyota Innova, a vehicle commonly used by the public and stayed at the Vatican Embassy instead of a high-end hotel.⁵² And when he put out his arm to wave at the crowd, people noticed that his casio watch was a simple one that anyone could buy in a normal store. With

⁵¹ Maria Ressa, “Hope Comes from Action,” *Vatican News*, January 25, 2025, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2025-01/jubilee-of-the-world-of-communications-maria-ressa.html>

⁵² Yustinus Paat and Mita Amalia Hapsari, “Pope Francis Rides Regular Toyota, Waves to Crowd from Open Window,” *Jakarta Globe*, September 3, 2024, <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/pope-francis-rides-regular-toyota-waves-to-crowd-from-open-window#:~:text=Pope%20Francis%20Rides%20Regular%20Toyota%2C%20Waves%20to%20Crowd%20from%20Open%20Window,-Yustinus%20Paat%2C%20Mita&text=Jakarta,Embassy%20in%20Jakarta%20on%20Tuesday.>

the eyes of the world following his every move, no doubt Pope Francis wanted this action to reinforce a broader message of living simply and rejecting excess, aligning with his teachings on being a “poor church for the poor,” caring for the environment, and promoting social equality.

In the homily delivered by Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re at Pope Francis’ funeral Mass on April 26, 2025—before hundreds of world and religious leaders, tens of thousands of faithful in attendance, and millions watching online—he eloquently reflected on Francis’ tireless advocacy for the marginalized, his promotion of mercy and fraternity, his call for peace and environmental stewardship, his challenge to isolationism, and his embodiment of prophetic leadership. Few, if any, would deny that Pope Francis lived out these ideals as fully in action as he did in word.

Pope Paul VI wisely said, “modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”⁵³ The goal of communication is to inspire and influence others, fostering a shared understanding and connection. The Greek term for “witness” is “martyr,” and many of the most influential figures in Christian history have been martyrs, whose profound commitment to God shines through their ultimate sacrifice. While martyrdom represents the highest form of Christian witness, all Christians are invited to live a life of self-sacrifice.

Christian discipleship is a calling that encompasses our whole being, allowing us to become channels for God’s love and living signs that point toward Christ.⁵⁴ Our witnessing action as communicative acts must be in the model of John the Baptist, that is, to point to Christ: “He must increase; I must decrease” (Jn 3:30). In the age of social media, for many people, being an influencer in words and deeds nowadays, are meant for self-promotion and for personal gains. Witnessing actions for Catholic communicators are not meant to gain “followers” and “engagement” for ourselves but ultimately, for Christ.

Final Remark

To conclude, this is my final point. All Christians are one way or another social communicators. Whether we are giving a homily, teaching a catechism class, doing pastoral counseling, making a YouTube video, or posting a status on Facebook, we are at all times and every time speaking and acting as members of the Church.

⁵³ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html, no. 41.

⁵⁴ Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence*, no. 78.

As we reflect on the theme of the SVD Jubilee year—“*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*”—let us allow the Light of Christ to envelop us, guiding us in our mission as faithful and creative disciples of Christ. In our discipleship, we must communicate prophetically, faithfully, and courageously in order to contribute to the healing of the wounds of today’s world.

Mission as *Missio Inter Gentes*: From Everywhere for Everyone

Antonio M. Pernia, SVD

“*From Everywhere for Everyone*” is the theme of the celebration in 2025 of the 150th founding anniversary of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD). This theme expresses, I believe, a new mission paradigm, namely, mission as *missio inter gentes*. As Stephen Bevans, in a talk given at the Second National Mission Congress of the Philippines in April 2022, put it: “Mission *ad gentes* in our time is no longer carried out simply *ad gentes*, but *inter gentes*.”¹ Further, he states:

The new direction of mission *ad gentes* in our day is to understand it as *inter gentes*. The more traditional understanding was one that moved from already Christianized countries to those who still needed to hear the gospel, or be strengthened in their fragile faith and fragile church structure. It was an understanding that emphasized the superiority of Western culture and ways of thought over all others. It was an understanding that went hand in hand with colonialism and with white privilege and racism. Understanding mission *ad gentes* in terms of *inter gentes* starts with the fact that mission today is “from everywhere to everywhere,” and “by everyone to everyone.” The frontiers of our time are not the frontiers of place, but the frontiers of people.²

¹ Stephen Bevans, “New Directions of *Missio ad Gentes* in the Changing Mission Frontiers of our Time,” in *Gifted to Give: Proceedings of the Second National Mission Congress of the Philippines*, ed. by Fr. Andrew Recepcion and Fr. Antonio M. Pernia, SVD (Manila: Episcopal Commission on Mission of the CBCP [Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines], 2023), 20.

² Bevans, “New Directions of *Missio ad Gentes* in the Changing Mission Frontiers of our Time,” 31.

The notion of “*missio inter gentes*” contains a number of nuances which have resulted from the different matrices from which it has emerged in missiological discussion. Three of these nuances in particular are relevant to mission in our time, namely (1) first, the Local Church as the subject of mission; (2) secondly, multiculturalism as the context of mission, and (3) thirdly, dialogue as the mode of mission. The aim of this essay is to explore these different but interlocking nuances of “*missio inter gentes*” and draw out their missiological implications.

The Local Church as Subject of Mission

As is now well known, the expression “*missio inter gentes*” was first proposed by missiologist William Burrows in his response to the plenary paper of Michael Amaladoss at the 2001 convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America.³ Burrows stated that “Christian mission in Asia is already primarily in the hands of Asians, and is better termed *missio INTER gentes* than *missio AD gentes*.”⁴ This statement highlights the contrast between “*missio AD gentes*” and “*missio INTER gentes*.” Indeed, one of the nuances of *missio AD gentes* was the coming to a local Church of foreign missionaries sent from Christian Europe. In contrast, the notion of *missio INTER gentes* emerged from the awareness that mission is no longer carried out principally by foreign missionaries but by local missionaries.

Mission by Local Missionaries

And so, “*missio inter gentes*” underscores the phenomenon of mission now being carried largely by local missionaries. This is, in fact, one of the developments in mission today, namely, mission being carried out more and more by missionaries originating from the “global South” and less and less by missionaries of European or North American origin. Europe and North America are no longer the primary source of missionaries. As we know, this has to do with, on the one hand, the drastic drop of religious and priestly vocations in Europe and North America, and, on the other hand, with the growth of

³ William Burrows, “A Response to Michael Amaladoss,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 56 (2001): 15-20, as cited by Jonathan Y. Tan, “Missio Inter Gentes,” in Lazar T. Stanislaus, SVD and Martin Ueffing, SVD, eds., *Intercultural Mission*, Vol. 2 (Sankt Augustin: Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, 2015), 189. The paper of Michael Amaladoss is “Pluralism of Religions and the Proclamation of Jesus Christ in the Context of Asia,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 56 (2001): 1-14.

⁴ Burrows, “A Response to Michael Amaladoss,” 15, as cited by Tan, “Missio Inter Gentes,” 189 (emphasis added).

vocations and the maturity of what formerly were called “mission churches” or the churches of the so-called “mission receiving” countries.

An indication of this is my own congregation, the Society of the Divine Word (SVD). Today in the SVD, the primary source of missionaries is now its Asia-Pacific (ASPAC) zone. In recent years more than two-thirds of those receiving first assignments in the Society have come from its Asia-Pacific Zone. Consequently, there are now over a 1000 SVD Asian missionaries working, outside of their home countries, in Europe, the US, Latin America, Africa, Oceania and other parts of Asia. And it is a fact that a similar situation obtains in many other religious missionary congregations today.⁵ In the words of Maryknoll Missioner, William Grimm, the publisher of UCANews,

The days when mission meant Westerners sharing the Gospel with non-Westerners have ended Now what was once a flood of Western missionaries to Asia has dwindled to a trickle, and Churches that once provided pastors for Asian Catholics now look to Asia to alleviate their own clergy shortages.⁶

Missiological Implications

“*Missio inter gentes*,” therefore, places the stress on the local Church as the primary subject of mission. And this requires a new way of understanding the idea of the “universal mission of the Church” and the reality of “cross-cultural mission.”

The universal mission of the Church

While traditionally the universal mission of the Church was, explicitly or implicitly, understood as mission emanating from the center (Europe in general or Rome in particular), now it needs to be seen as mission emanating from every local Church. Mission is universal not because it proceeds from a common center, but because it is carried out everywhere where there is a viable local Church. Thus, the primary subject of mission is no longer the center in Europe or Rome, but every local Church in every continent.

Missio inter gentes, therefore, places the primary responsibility for mission on the local Churches rather than on the “Universal Church” represented by Rome. The mandate for mission is seen no longer as emanating from the

⁵ See Rose Nkechi Uchem, “Shifting Perceptions of Mission,” *SEDOS Bulletin* 41/11-12, November-December 2009, 261-270.

⁶ UCA News, “The Changing Face of Asian Mission,” December 22, 2021, <https://www.ucanews.com/the-changing-face-of-asian-mission>.

center in Rome, but as arising from the fact of being Church. As Vatican II's Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes* (AG),⁷ puts it, "the pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature (AG 2)." In other words, the "missionariness" of the Church arises not from an external mandate but from the Church's very nature. Indeed, with *missio inter gentes*, this statement of Vatican II is realized no longer simply with the "Universal Church" based in Rome sending out missionaries to the "pagan world," but with each local Church living out its missionary vocation.

The centrality of the local Church in mission has also been stressed by Pope Francis. In his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG),⁸ he states that

Each particular Church is the primary subject of evangelization, since it is the concrete manifestation of the one Church in one specific place, and in it "the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and operative." It is the Church incarnate in a certain place, equipped with all the means of salvation bestowed by Christ, but with local features (EG 30).

This emphasis on the local Church is also implied by Pope Francis' vision of the Church as a Church of "closeness and proximity." This was underlined by John Christian Young in his talk to the above-mentioned Second National Mission Congress of the Philippines, claiming as a result that the local Church is the proper locus of missionary discipleship. It is in the local Church that this "closeness and proximity" manifests itself concretely for it is in the local context that the Church is most proximate or near to the people. Thus, it is also in the local Church that the challenges to mission can be better discerned and responded to.⁹

Cross-cultural mission

This insight about the local church being the primary subject of mission does not, however, necessarily make "foreign missionaries" or "cross-cultural missionaries" irrelevant, just as it does not by any means invalidate the notion of *missio ad gentes*. Understanding the "Universal Church" as a communion of local Churches, there will always be need for the presence of "cross-cultural

⁷ Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html.

⁸ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

⁹ See John Christian Young, "Missionary Discipleship in the Local Church," in *Gifted to Give: Proceedings of the Second National Mission Congress of the Philippines*, 2022, 36.

missionaries” in local Churches. For the gospel of Jesus Christ always brings something new to the local culture. And this “newness” is represented and offered by the presence of the “foreign” missionary or the missionary who is not native to the local culture. Indeed, the “newness” of the gospel is not something that any culture can reach or achieve on its own. It is, fundamentally, grace or gift from the outside. Herein lies the enduring validity of the notion of *missio ad gentes*.

Thus, “cross-cultural mission” needs to be understood in a new way—no longer the coming from outside of missionaries with a “superior” faith and culture, but the partnership of missionaries who collaborate in mission despite the diversity of their experiences of the faith and the diversity of their cultures. In the universal communion of local Churches, the relationship will be characterized not by paternalism but by fraternity, not by domination but by communion, not by superiority but by mutuality, not by power and control but by mutual respect and appreciation.

In the light of this understanding of cross-cultural mission, the principal role of the foreign missionary in the local Church is, I believe, twofold: First, foreign missionaries provide the connection of the local Church with the Universal Church, or with the universal communion of local Churches. A local Church is never sufficient unto itself. The local Church is truly Church only insofar as it is in communion with all the local Churches around the world. Secondly, foreign missionaries serve as a reminder of the newness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; a reminder that there is something the Gospel offers which is not found in the local culture; that the Gospel indeed elevates and ennobles the local culture; that on its own, a local culture cannot reach or achieve the newness which is entailed by the Gospel of Jesus.

Missio inter gentes, therefore, underlines the fact that, all local Churches, while they may not be equal in material resources and possibilities, are nevertheless equal in Christian dignity and missionary responsibility. In other words, there is no longer a local Church that is only “mission-sending” or only “mission-receiving.” All local Churches are both “mission-sending” and “mission-receiving,” for all local Churches, in the words of Vatican II’s decree *Ad Gentes*, are missionary by their very nature.

Multiculturality as the Context of Mission

The notion of *missio inter gentes* can also be said to have arisen out of the situation of the growing multiculturalism of our globalized world—that is, the situation whereby various cultures co-exist side by side each other in the same

society or community. This situation has been brought about largely by the phenomenon of international migration, or the massive movement of people around the world. While migration is an age-old phenomenon, the global character of migration in our time is what gives it a particular prominence. International migrants come from all over the world and travel to all parts of the world. In 2020, the estimate was that there were 281 million international migrants worldwide, which equates to about 3.6 percent of the global population.¹⁰

“Gentes” Everywhere

The situation of multiculturalism in today’s world has led to the breakdown of the traditional demarcation between the Church and the “*Gentes*.”

Since the time of the early church, a clear distinction and demarcation existed between the “*gentes*” (*ethne*) and the “*populus Dei*” (*laos tou theou*)—that is, the distinction between the chosen people of God and the nations, or the Jews and the gentiles, the circumcised and the uncircumcised, the believers and pagans. In fact, this distinction became the basis of the division of labor between Peter and Paul. As Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians: “... they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter to the circumcised, for the one who worked in Peter for an apostolate to the circumcised worked also in me for the Gentiles” (Gal 2:7-8). Thus, a clear demarcation between the Church on one side and the “*Gentes*” on the other.

This distinction was also expressed as the distinction between the “center of faith” and the “periphery of unbelief,” or the distinction between “inside” and “outside.” In the early church, the center of faith was Jerusalem and the surrounding nations the periphery of unbelief. In much of the history of the church, Christian Europe was the center of faith and the rest of the world the periphery of unbelief. In the context of this dual distinction, “*missio ad gentes*” was necessarily “*missio ad extra*.” Mission was “going out” (*ad extra*) to the “pagan nations” (*ad gentes*). Mission was a one-way movement from Christian Europe to the pagan world. In a sense, the Church was neatly divided into the “missionary Church” of Europe and North America and the “mission Churches” in Africa, Asia, Oceania, Latin America. Likewise, the world was divided into the “mission-sending” countries of Christian Europe and the “mission-receiving” countries of the rest of the world.

With the massive movement of people around the world and the consequent multiculturalism of the world, it follows that today *missio ad gentes* can

¹⁰ See IOM (International Organization for Migration), *World Migration Report 2024* (Geneva: IOM, 2024), <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/msite/wmr-2024-interactive/> (accessed 28 October 2024).

no longer be identified exclusively with *missio ad extra*. For the “*gentes*” are no longer only those who are out there, those who are outside, those on the other side. The “*gentes*” are also here among us and around us. It may be the family that lives next door, the person I sit beside in the bus, the young man who comes to fix my computer, the lady in the market I buy vegetables from. Today, more and more, *missio ad gentes* needs to be understood in terms of *missio inter gentes*.

Missiological Implications

Two implications, among others, may be drawn from this situation where multiculturalism is the context of mission today—that is, first, an enlarged understanding of mission and secondly, mission as the promotion of interculturality.

An enlarged understanding of mission

When seen not as a replacement of but as a complement to *missio ad gentes*, *missio inter gentes* can enrich our understanding of mission today. Three nuances of *missio “INTER” gentes* suggest an enlarged concept of mission today:

- (a) *Mission as Dialogue WITH people.* While “*ad gentes*” underlines the necessity of proclamation, “*inter gentes*” stresses the indispensability of dialogue in mission. While the direct proclamation of the Gospel remains a permanent requirement in mission, dialogue has also become an imperative in mission. As the 1984 document of what used to be the Secretariat for Non-Christians (*Dialogue and Mission*) puts it, “Dialogue is ... the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission, as well as of every aspect of it Any sense of mission not permeated by such a dialogical spirit would go against the demands of true humanity and against the teachings of the Gospel.”¹¹ In other words, dialogue is no longer simply an option that we are at liberty to do or not do. It is now a missiological imperative that we cannot do without.
- (b) *Mission as Encounter BETWEEN peoples.* While “*ad gentes*” brings out the idea of a specialized group of persons (missionaries, religious, priests) being sent on mission to other peoples, “*inter gentes*” evokes the notion of mission taking place in the encounter between entire communities or

¹¹ See Secretariat for Non-Christians, *The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions* (“*Dialogue and Mission*”), 1984, no. 29, <https://columbanird.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/DIALOGUE-MISSION.pdf>.

groups of people. One can think, for instance, of the dialogue of life between the members of one Catholic parish and those of a local Muslim community, or of the students of a Catholic school and those of a non-Christian school. One can also think of the witness given by Catholic migrant workers in a Muslim country in the Middle East, or the witness of Catholic migrant domestic helpers in the homes in secularized Europe. As Church documents never tire of repeating, mission is not just a prerogative of specialized individuals in the Church but the duty of the entire People of God.

- (c) *Mission as Finding a Home AMONG the people.* While “*ad gentes*” stresses the cross-cultural nature of mission and evokes the picture of the missionary being sent to another people, “*inter gentes*” underlines the fact that the missionary is sent in order to settle in and find a new home among the people. One’s mission is meant not just as a temporary workplace but as a permanent home among a new people. This is part of the whole purpose of inculturation and cultural adaptation. This is part of the logic of the incarnation. Just as the Divine Word pitched his tent among us, so also the missionary is expected to pitch his or her tent among the people to whom he or she is sent. This is exemplified in the life of many of our earlier missionaries. An example is one of the first two SVD missionaries to China, St. Joseph Freinademetz, who strove to become a “Chinese among the Chinese.”

Thus, *Missio INTER Gentes* enlarges our understanding of mission—mission as dialogue WITH people, mission as encounter BETWEEN peoples, and mission as finding a home AMONG the people.

Mission as interculturality

The phenomenon of the multiculturalism of today’s world constitutes a veritable missionary challenge today, recognized as such by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* (see 71-75). He says, “the changes taking place in these great spaces and the culture which they create are a privileged locus of the new evangelization” (EG 73). “What is called for is an evangelization capable of shedding light on these new ways of relating to God, to others and to the world around us, The Church is called to be at the service of a *difficult dialogue* (EG 74, emphasis added). “Interculturality” or “intercultural dialogue” is what this “difficult dialogue” is about.

Perhaps the distinction between “multiculturalism” and “interculturality” needs to be noted at this point. This distinction may be expressed in the

following way.¹² The term “Multiculturalism” refers the sociological FACT or REALITY whereby several cultures co-exist side by side each other in the same society or community. On the other hand, the term “interculturality” refers to the theological IDEAL or GOAL whereby the different cultures in society or in the community are made to interact with each other, so that they do not only co-exist with each other, much less are in conflict with one another, but enrich and transform each other.

In the light of this distinction, interculturality may be defined as the “sustained interaction of people of different cultural backgrounds leading to the transformation and enrichment of each one and everyone.”¹³ And while, in the context of multiculturalism, governments and states and other secular entities seem to be content with the peaceful co-existence among people of different cultures, the Church aims for more than civil tolerance and works towards the mutually enriching interaction among different cultures.¹⁴ Put differently, the Church aims at going beyond the mere fact of multiculturalism towards the ideal of genuine interculturality.

Obviously, interculturality or intercultural dialogue takes place best in the context of what we saw above as the enlarged understanding of mission, that is, mission as dialogue with people, encounter between peoples, and finding a home among the people. In other words, interculturality takes place best in the context of mission as *missio inter gentes*.

Dialogue as the Mode of Mission

A third nuance of “*missio inter gentes*” is connected with the emergence of the notion of “dialogue” in missiological parlance. This dates back to Vatican II which underlines dialogue as an important missiological concept in several of its documents. For instance, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, states that the Church relates with the world in dialogue characterized by “solidarity, respect and love.”¹⁵ *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, says that the “Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in other religions,” and

¹² See Anthony Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally: Faith, Culture and the Renewal of Praxis* (Collegeville Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015), 18-24.

¹³ Lazar T. Stanislaus, SVD and Martin Ueffing, SVD, eds., *Intercultural Living*, Vol. 1 (Sankt Augustin: Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, 2015), xxiv.

¹⁴ See Maria Cimperman, RSCJ and Roger P. Schroeder, SVD, eds., *Engaging Our Diversity: Interculturality and Consecrated Life Today* (New York, NY: Orbis, 2020), vii.

¹⁵ See Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, no. 3, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

urges Catholics to “enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions.”¹⁶

Post-conciliar documents underline the idea of dialogue even more strongly. Pope Paul VI’s first encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* states that “God Himself took the initiative in the dialogue of salvation We, therefore, must be the first to ask for a dialogue with men, without waiting to be summoned to it by others.”¹⁷ Similarly Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* asserts that “Each member of the faithful and all Christian communities are called to practice dialogue, although not always to the same degree or in the same way.”

A Debate on Prepositions

The emergence of the notion of “dialogue” in missiology has led to what Daniel Patrick Huang, in his talk to the Second National Mission Congress of the Philippines, “a lively discussion among missiologists and theologians precisely about prepositions: whether we should speak and think of mission as *ad gentes* (“to the peoples”), *inter gentes* (“among or between peoples”), or *cum gentibus* (“with the peoples”).”¹⁸ He groups the different opinions on this question into three:

One might identify three basic options, which we might call “retention,” “substitution,” and “complementarity.” First are those who would argue for the *retention* of the exclusive use of *ad gentes* language, judging that any other manner of speaking would erroneously suggest that Christianity is on the same level as other religions, and weaken the effort to call non-Christians to conversion to Christianity. A second position proposes that we *stop* using the language of *ad gentes* in speaking of mission, and *substitute* instead other prepositions, namely *inter* and *cum*: *inter gentes* and *cum gentibus*. A third group views the three prepositions as *complementary*, and proposes allowing *inter gentes* and/or *cum gentibus* to complement or enrich the more traditional language of *ad gentes*.¹⁹

One of criticisms of mission understood solely as “*ad gentes*” is that mission is seen as a “one-way street” where everything is done by the missionary

¹⁶ See Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, 1965, no. 2, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

¹⁷ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 72, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html.

¹⁸ Daniel Patrick Huang, SJ, “Rethinking *MISSIO AD GENTES* in the Context of the Church in Asia,” in *Gifted to Give: Proceedings of the Second National Mission Congress of the Philippines*, 2022, 44.

¹⁹ Huang, “Rethinking *MISSIO AD GENTES* in the Context of the Church in Asia,” 44.

for the people. The missionary is the evangelizer, the people the evangelized. The missionary is the bearer of good news, the people the recipient of the gospel. The missionary is the preacher who proclaims the truth, the people the ones who need conversion. The implicit assumption is that the people are completely devoid of any spiritual treasure, and therefore have nothing to share in return.²⁰

Missio inter gentes corrects this older view of mission and underlines the fact that mission is a two-way exchange of gifts between missionaries and the people. Dialogue implies that the Spirit is at work in the people being evangelized as well as in the evangelizers themselves.²¹ In other words, mission is the process not only of the missionary evangelizing the people, but also of the missionary being evangelized by the people. Mission is not only about what God does to the people through the missionary, but also about what God does to the missionary through the people. Consequently, missionaries must be ready to give and receive, to evangelize and be evangelized, to speak and to listen. They must be prepared to change and be changed, to form and be formed, to invite to conversion and be converted themselves.²²

Missiological Implications

Two implications may also be drawn from this shift of emphasis from *missio ad gentes* to *missio inter gentes*, namely, first, mission as *Missio Dei*, and secondly, mission as spirituality.

Mission as missio Dei

The notion of dialogue entailed in *mission inter gentes* highlights the understanding of mission as God's mission (*missio Dei*) before it is the mission of the Church (*missio ecclesiae*). While traditionally the origin of mission was traced back to the mission mandate received by the disciples on the day of the Ascension (see Mt 28: 18-20), today mission is seen as originating from the Triune God as such. This is underlined by Vatican II itself. Its Decree *Ad*

²⁰ "We are not the 'haves,' the *beati possidentes*, standing over against the spiritual 'have nots,' the *massa damnata*." David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991); 484.

²¹ See Donal Dorr, *Mission in Today's World* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2000), 202 ff.

²² This idea is also sometimes expressed as "mission in reverse", i.e., "we need to be evangelized by the people before we can evangelize them; we need to allow the people among whom we work to be our teachers before we presume to teach them." See Claude Marie Barbour, "Seeking Justice and Shalom in the City" in *International Review of Mission* 73 (1984): 303-309, as cited in Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 59.

Gentes traces the origin of mission to the sending by the Father of the Son and the Holy Spirit in order to bring about God's universal plan of salvation (see AG 1-2, 9). This idea has now come to be known as "the Trinitarian origin of Mission."

This idea of Vatican II parallels the notion of *Missio Dei* in Protestant theology, by which mission is understood as derived from the very nature of God.²³ Mission is not primarily an activity of the Church, but an attribute of God. As Triune, God is a missionary God, and mission is seen as a movement from God to the world. The Church is viewed as an instrument for this mission. Thus, there is Church because there is mission, and not vice-versa. Or, it is not the Church of Christ that has a mission, but the mission of Christ which has a Church to carry it forward.²⁴ Or as Pope Francis puts it: "It is not the Church that makes the mission, but the mission that makes the Church."²⁵

The theology behind the notion of *missio Dei* is the vision of the Triune God as communion and communication, interaction and dialogue, between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And this inner communication or dialogue overflows into—or better, embraces—creation and history. Mission, then, is the Triune God's ongoing dialogue with the world and with humanity, a dialogue that invites and draws humanity and all of creation into full communion with the Divine community. Thus, there is mission not because it is mandated by the Church, but because God is a Triune God. Before being about what the Church does, mission is about who God is.

So, while traditionally, the origin of mission was traced back to the "mission mandate" received by the Church on the day of the Ascension, contemporary missiology pushes the origin of mission back to the very beginning, i.e., to the very heart of the Trinity, the inner communication or dialogue within the Divine Community itself.

²³ See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389-393. As a modern missiological concept, *Missio Dei* can be traced back to the work of Karl Barth in the 1930's. It was first introduced at the International Missionary Conference (IMC) at Wellingin in 1952 by K. Hartenstein, director of the Basel Mission. See also Theo Sundermeier, "Theology of Mission" in *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives*, ed. by Karl Muller, et al. (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 434.

²⁴ See Adrian Hastings, "Mission" in *Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (NY: Crossroad, 1975), 967-969. See also Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 8.

²⁵ Francis, "Address to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples," December 3, 2015, No. 1, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/december/documents/papa-francesco_20151203_plenaria-propaganda-fide.html.

Mission as spirituality

The view entailed by *missio inter gentes* on the dialogical nature of mission whereby the missionary not only evangelizes the people but also allows himself/herself to be evangelized by the people leads to the idea of mission as not only activity but also spirituality. Mission is not just what the missionary does, but also what the missionary becomes because of what he or she does. Indeed, the value of understanding mission as *missio inter gentes* is that it integrates both dimensions of mission—activity and spirituality, or action and contemplation

This kind of spirituality is specifically *missionary* spirituality—that is to say, a spirituality that arises from one's mission engagement, rather than a spirituality previously developed through the practice of religious exercises in the religious community. In other words, it is a spirituality whereby mission engagements like inculturation, interreligious dialogue or integral liberation become the source of spiritual nourishment, constituting thereby one's path to conversion and holiness. For instance, the missionary becoming a just and peaceable person because of his or her work for justice and peace, or the missionary becoming a person of the Word because of his or her work in the biblical apostolate, or the missionary becoming a person of dialogue because of his or her work in interreligious dialogue.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 78, Pope Francis laments the fact that for many pastoral workers, “the spiritual life comes to be identified with a few religious exercises which can offer a certain comfort but which do not encourage encounter with others, engagement with the world or a passion for evangelization. As a result, one can observe in many agents of evangelization, even though they pray, a heightened individualism, a crisis of identity and a cooling of fervour.” Thus, Pope Francis proposes a “spirituality of encounter” as today's missionary spirituality—encounter especially with those in the peripheries of society which brings about a transformation of oneself. For as St. Joseph Freinademetz used to say, “the greatest task of the missionary is the transformation of one's inner self.”²⁶

Mission as *missio inter gentes*, therefore, entails some fundamental attitudes in mission. Among the many, the following three, I believe, are essential:

- (a) *Contemplation*. The origin of mission is the Triune God. Our participation in mission is, therefore, an encounter with mystery—the mystery of the Triune God who calls all of humanity and the whole of creation to share

²⁶ See Josef Hollweck, *Joseph Freinademetz: Serving the People of China*. Short Biography for the canonization. Trans. by Jacqueline Mulberge (Città di Castello: GESPE, 2003), 12–14.

in God's life and glory, the mystery of God's salvific plan for the world, the mystery of the presence and action of Christ and the Spirit in the world. Thus, the very first challenge in mission is to seek out, discern and strengthen the presence of Christ and the action of the Spirit in the world. But it will be impossible to discern if we do not approach mission in contemplation. For to contemplate is precisely to look, to listen, to learn, to discern, to respond, to collaborate. The missionary, then, evangelizes not primarily by doing things for the people but by being with them and enabling them to do things themselves. The missionary's mission method will be marked not by frenetic activity but by contemplative presence among God's people. He or she will give priority to *being missionary* over *doing missionary things*.

- (b) *Humility*. The understanding of mission as *Missio Dei* makes us realize that the missionary is never the "owner" or "master" of the gospel, but only its "steward" and "servant." Today, then, the missionary is called to preach the gospel not as if he or she owned it (like some missionaries in the past), dictating thereby the terms by which it must be understood (doctrine/dogma), lived (morals/ethics) and celebrated (liturgy/worship). The approach of the missionary today must be to share the faith not as one's possession but as a gift received from God and from others. This entails that today the missionary is called to evangelize not from a position of power and superiority where he/she looks down on the people, but from a position of powerlessness, lowliness and humility, where the missionary stands in solidarity with the people. The ultimate reason for humility in mission is that mission is God's and not ours, and the primary agent of mission is God's Spirit and not us.
- (c) *Joy*. Often in the past, mission was understood as a response to a mandate and obedience to a command. Thus, it was seen as entailing a burden and a sacrifice—particularly, the giving up of one's home and country in order to go to far-away lands, and the readiness of live a life of deprivation and hardship in conditions regarded as "primitive." However, seeing mission as *Missio Dei* makes us realize that our call to mission is a call to participate in God's mission and share in God's dream for this world. And this cannot just be a burden and sacrifice, but, above all, a gift and privilege. As St Joseph Freinademetz wrote to his family after he learned that he was being sent to China as a missionary: "Thank God ... that the Lord has given us the grace of having a missionary in our family ... I do not consider this as a sacrifice that I offer to God, but as the greatest gift that God is giving me." In *Evangelii Gaudium* (see Nos. 1-13), Pope Francis says that every genuine encounter with Jesus is an experience of joy. The Gospel

therefore is an invitation to joy. Thus, mission, or proclaiming the Gospel, must also be an experience of joy.

Conclusion

“*Missio inter gentes*” is a mission paradigm that is polyvalent in meaning, containing a number of nuances arising from the different matrices from which it has emerged in missiological parlance. Among these different nuances, the main ones seem to be, as explored in this essay, the local Church as the primary subject of mission, multiculturalism as today’s context of mission, and dialogue as the mode of mission. As such, it resonates with Pope Francis’ vision of the Church. Although he never once explicitly used the term, his many statements about the Church and its mission echo this mission paradigm. In his interview with *America Magazine* in 2013, one of the first interviews of his papacy, he said:

I see clearly that what the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful. It needs nearness and proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after a battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol or about the level of his blood sugar. You have to heal the wounds first, then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, and you have to start from the ground up.²⁷

A Church of nearness and proximity, a field hospital rather than a bureaucratic institution, indeed, a Church *inter gentes*.

²⁷ Francis, Interview with *America Magazine*, 2013, as quoted in John Christian Young, “Missionary Discipleship in the Local Church,” 36.

Witnessing to the Light in the Australia Province: From Everywhere for Everyone

Clement Baffoe, SVD

To begin with, I would like to offer a brief historical background of our congregation. While this may seem unnecessary to us the SVDs and SSsP families, I include it for the benefit of those outside the Arnoldus family. The Society of the Divine Word was founded in 1875, and in 2025, we celebrate the 150th anniversary of our congregation. The theme chosen for this sesqui-centennial anniversary is “*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*.” This theme draws upon the content that can be found throughout Scripture, Church documents, the SVD constitutions and publications, and, importantly, in the living witness of our confreres in their diverse ministries.

Although the theme has already inspired numerous reflections across the SVD world, this essay takes a different approach. It aims to explore and clarify the key components of the theme: What does it mean to witness to the Light? From where are we sent? To whom and where are we sent? In doing so, I will focus particularly on our context in SVD Australia.

Witnessing to the Light

Jesus the Light

A passage well known to us as Divine Word Missionaries is the Prologue of the Gospel of John. In the Prologue, a clear distinction is drawn between John the Baptist and the Light. It is evident that John was not the Light but came to bear witness to the Light (Jn 1:6-8). Reflecting on the relation between Jesus and the Church, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms: “The

Church has no other light than Christ's; according to a favorite image of the Church Fathers, the Church is like the moon, all its light reflected from the sun."¹ The Church, therefore, is a sacrament that reflects the Light—Christ Himself—to the world.

The Missionary—A Witness Who Knows the Light

The first part of the theme for the SVD's sesquicentennial anniversary is "*Witnessing to the Light*." Like John the Baptist, we have a distinct and defined role in the mission of Jesus. We are called not only to be signs or sacraments of Christ but, more importantly, to be witnesses—those who have encountered the Light personally, the Light who is Jesus: "I am the Light of the world" (Jn 8:12).

When Jesus called his disciples in the Gospel of Mark, their first and foremost task was to be with him, and only later to be sent out (Mk 3:14). This being with him—being rooted in the Light and in his Word—must come before all else. As the saying goes, "You cannot give what you do not have." How can we truly witness to Christ if we have not entered into a personal relationship with Him? This idea is echoed in the First Letter of John, where the author affirms the authenticity of their apostolic witness: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched, this we proclaim concerning the Word of God."

The witness of the Apostles was clearly rooted in their personal and physical experience of Jesus. Emphasizing the importance of relationship with Christ, the *Constitutions* of our Society affirm:

It is by listening to the word of God and living it that we become co-workers of the Divine Word. The witness of a truly Christian life on the personal and community level is the first step in the realization of our missionary service. People must be able to recognize that we have experienced in our own lives the kingdom that we proclaim to others.²

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_one/section_two/chapter_three/article_9.html.

² SVD Publications, "The Constitutions of the Society of the Divine Word," <https://svdcu-ria.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Constitutions-SVD.pdf>

Although we may not have the same physical encounter with the historical Jesus—the privilege to touch, see, and hear him as the Apostles did—we are nonetheless graced with the means to encounter Him today. We hear Him in the daily reading of Scripture, touch Him in the Eucharist, and see Him in our brothers and sisters, especially those on the margins of society. Without such a real encounter with Christ, we risk bearing witness not to Him, but to ourselves and our hidden egos. Pope Paul VI, in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, makes this point powerfully: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”³

In our ministries—whether among the Indigenous peoples of Far North Queensland, Emerald, the Northern Territory, Balgo, or in city parishes—people are not primarily seeking eloquent sermons or impressive programs. They long to encounter priests who radiate the light of Christ. That light must dispel the darkness that surrounds our mission contexts: the darkness of clericalism, racism, gender inequality, and other societal injustices. No matter how stirring our homilies or talks may be, they become mere performances—hypocritical even—if our personal and community lives do not reflect the life and light of Jesus. The 150th anniversary of our congregation offers us a timely opportunity to reflect on the state of our own spiritual lives as confreres of the Australia Province. At the heart of this reflection lie essential questions: Do I truly know Jesus? Have I encountered Him personally? Does my missionary impulse flow from a deep, personal conviction rooted in Christ?

From Everywhere

Interculturality

The second part of the sesquicentennial theme—“*from everywhere*”—speaks directly to the global character of our congregation. As of January 2025, the Society of the Divine Word includes 5,641 members from 76 countries. Within the Australia Province alone, we are about 100 members, including students, representing 26 different nationalities, according to the 2025 Directory. We can rightly say that we are, indeed, *from everywhere*.

This phrase highlights the universal and inclusive nature of our missionary vocation. The call to be witnesses to the Light is not confined to any one race, gender, or group. As priests and brothers, we have come from diverse places with a shared purpose: to bear witness to the Light and, together with

³ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation, 1975, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html.

the people we serve, to discover the Light that has long been present—sometimes for millennia—within their cultures and communities.⁴ Martin Ueffing summarises this point succinctly when he says we are “...missioned not so much to introduce Christ to ‘others’...as if he were a total stranger, but rather to help the ‘others’ find him already present and active in the heart of all people.”⁵ In the Australia Province, approximately 98 percent of confreres in active ministry are from countries outside Australia. This remarkable diversity greatly enriches both our province and the wider local Church.

As Divine Word Missionaries, we believe that interculturality is part of our very DNA. Whether we serve in Australia, Thailand, Myanmar, or New Zealand, we do not simply work in multicultural settings—where cultures exist side by side without significant interaction. Rather, we live *interculturally*: engaging deeply with one another’s cultures and, above all, with the local culture, entering into genuine relationships and dialogue. Archbishop Paulus Budi Kleden, SVD explains that a true intercultural community is the one in which there is equality between its members and there is not either superiority or inferiority among its members. Furthermore, he says an intercultural community respects the individuality of its members without obliterating in collectivism. Community is encouraged over individualism.⁶ Ad-intra, within our SVD communities here in the province, we need to reassess our community dynamics. Are we fostering genuine equality among confreres, particularly between parish priests and associates? Do we encourage healthy individuality or slide into individualism? And are we allowing collectivism to overshadow authentic community life?

It is also worth noting that being *from everywhere* means we bring with us a multitude of cultural perspectives and traditions. This can be both a gift and a challenge. From my own experience in parish ministry as a missionary from outside Australia, I have encountered challenges such as language or accent barriers, reluctance among some parishioners to accept foreign priests, and at times an unspoken tendency to compare us to our “white” Australian predecessors.

Conversely, there is also the tendency of some expatriate confreres and even migrant parishioners wanting to turn local churches into those which they have known from their countries of origin. There are instances where foreign devotional practices, vestments, and religious articles have been introduced to

⁴ SVD Publications, “Documents of the 19th General Chapter 2024,” 2024, <https://svdcu-ria.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Faithful-to-the-Word-No6.pdf>

⁵ Lazar T. Stanislaus and Martin Ueffing, ed., *Intercultural Living*, Vol. 1 (New Delhi: ISPK, 2015), 315.

⁶ Lazar and Ueffing, *Intercultural Living*, 27-30.

areas where these traditions hold little or no importance. While the diverse expressions of music, dance, cuisine, and aesthetics from our various cultures can enrich the Australian Church's spiritual life, we must take care not to displace the authentic religious experience of local parishes. Fr. Antonio Pernia, SVD, former Superior General of the Society of the Divine Word, cautioned against the tendency toward imposition in mission and offered our *Anthropos* tradition—an attitude of respect and openness toward other cultures—as a paradigm for evangelization:

Our Anthropos tradition is really a way of doing mission which considers an appreciation of people's culture as a necessary precondition for genuine evangelization. A way of doing mission whereby the gospel message is not simply parachuted from outside, but enters into dialogue with the culture of the people. And so, a way of doing mission whereby the missionary is ready not just to change people but to be changed himself, or as EN (e.g. no. 15) puts it, a way of evangelizing whereby the evangelizer not only evangelizes but allows himself or herself to be evangelized.⁷

As a Province that takes our mission with the indigenous peoples as a priority, how well do we prepare or train our confreres in the indigenous cultures before they are sent there? And how willing and open are our confreres to learn these cultures and their languages when sent among the people? Also, in the Apostolic Letter, *Maximum Illud*, Pope Benedict XV cautioned against this tendency of wanting to superimpose one's national or cultural interests on local churches. True inculturation is not about advancing the homeland of the missionary, but about bearing witness to the Light in ways that genuinely resonate with—and uplift—the faith life of the local Church.⁸

From Everywhere but Working with Others: Mission as Collaboration

The Akan people of Ghana have a proverb: “When two people carry something, it does not feel as heavy.” This wisdom reminds us that no matter how difficult a task may be, collaboration and shared responsibility make it more manageable. In our Province, the geographical scope of our mission is vast, yet our number of priests remains limited. This reality calls for a deepened sense of co-responsibility with the laity. Their active involvement is not optional—it is essential. As the Council Fathers observed, “Their activity is

⁷ Antonio M. Pernia, “Expectations of the Generalate of the Anthropos Institute,” *Verbum SVD* 45, no. 1 (2004): 34.

⁸ Benedict XV, *Maximum Illud*, Apostolic Letter, 1919, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xv/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xv_apl_19191130_maximum-illud.html.

so necessary within the Church communities that without it the apostolate of the pastors is often unable to achieve its full effectiveness.”⁹ Likewise, in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis exhorts:

In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. *Mt* 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients.¹⁰

As a congregation, we are blessed to have Lay Partners—also known in some provinces as “Friends of the SVD.” Who are they?

SVD lay partners/associates are partners in continuing God’s mission with the Society of the Divine Word. By their baptism, they are missionary disciples, by sharing Arnoldus Spirituality and the SVD charism, they become significant members of SVD lay partners. They participate in the missionary activities together with the SVD or independently with the guidance of an SVD spiritual animator in carrying out the charism of the Society.¹¹

More than simply participating in our General Chapters in Rome, Province Chapters, and Assemblies, our Lay Partners also share deeply in the Arnoldus Spirituality that animates our missionary vocation. In our Province, this group has been active in Sydney since 2021, though it is not yet present in other dioceses. This reality invites us, as Missionaries of the Divine Word, to ask ourselves honestly: How actively and meaningfully do we involve these Lay Partners in the SVD mission, especially in Sydney where they are currently established?

Is their presence merely a symbolic gesture—to “tick the box” of collaboration—or are we consciously and intentionally integrating them into our apostolates? In our parishes, how do we perceive our pastoral teams—such as the Parish Pastoral Council, Parish Finance Council, Sacramental Program Team, and the Assistant Principals for Religious Education (APREs) in our schools? Do we see them as genuine collaborators in mission, or merely as

⁹ Paul VI, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html#No_to_spiritual_worldliness.

¹¹ SVD Lay Partners, <https://svdcuria.org/svd-lay-partners-page/>.

advisory bodies meant to endorse the vision and direction set solely by the Parish Priest?

Do we allow these lay collaborators to be “creative disciples”—bringing their gifts, insights, and fresh ideas to the table—or do we operate as if the SVD priest has all the answers? *Lumen Gentium* offers clear guidance on this matter:

Pastors...should recognize and promote the dignity and responsibility of the laity in the Church; they should gladly make use of their prudent advice, confidently entrust them with offices in the service of the Church and leave them freedom and room for action, and even encourage them to undertake works on their own initiative. They should consider attentively and with fatherly affection in Christ the initiatives, requests and desires proposed by the laity and, finally, they should respect and recognize that just freedom which belongs to all in the earthly city.¹²

Together with our Lay Partners and collaborators, we are called from diverse walks of life and cultural backgrounds, but united in a single mission: to be witnesses to the Light.

Collaboration and Dialogue Outside Our Pews

In our quest to bring the light to others in our Australian setting, there is a group of people whom we cannot do without and these are those who are not in our churches. The first to consider in this group are those of other Christian denominations as well as other religions. Emphasising the need for collaboration with other churches, the document *Dialogue and Proclamation* says:

The importance of dialogue for integral development, social justice and human liberation needs to be stressed. Local Churches are called upon, as witnesses to Christ, to commit themselves in this respect in an unselfish and impartial manner. There is need to stand up for human rights, proclaim the demands of justice, and denounce injustice not only when their own members are victimized, but independently of the religious allegiance of the victims. There is need also to join together in trying to solve the great problems facing society and the world, as well as in education for justice and peace.¹³

¹² Vatican Council II, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*,” 1964, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_const_1964_1121_lumen-gentium_it.html.

¹³ Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, “Dialogue and Proclamation,” 1991, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html

During my time in the Townsville Diocese, North Queensland, I was privileged to work with the Townsville Multicultural Support Group (TMSG), a not-for-profit organization that collaborates with the Australian Government's Humanitarian Programme to help families of migrants and refugees to settle in Australia.¹⁴ It is worth knowing that the majority of the people with whom I worked were either of other Christian denominations or religions. I worked with Muslims, Anglicans, Uniting Church pastors and many others. Together, we were engaged in a "dialogue of action, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people."¹⁵ We used to organize walks on every Palm Sunday in which we signed petitions for the rights of migrants and refugees. More and more, Australia is becoming multi-religious with the in-flow of migrants and refugees and this presents an area where, as confreres, we can pay critical attention through dialogue of life, action, theological exchange, and religious experience.¹⁶

The second group to consider is those of no religion. According to the 2021 Australian Census, about 38.9 per cent of Australians said they had no religion.¹⁷ And considering the trajectory from the previous years, the number is more likely to rise exponentially in the near future. It must, however, be clarified that those who have no religion might not necessarily be denying God or be unbelievers; rather they have moved away from organised or institutional religion. Those who subscribe to no religion are with us in the different areas of our ministries here in Australia, be it in the Nursing Homes, mission to seafarers and hospital ministries, among others. We can choose to ignore them since they do not share our belief or we can decide to engage, dialogue, and collaborate with them for the common good—and I believe that the latter is the way to go.

The Church, speaking about the need to collaborate with these, but singling out atheists, declares: "While rejecting atheism, root and branch, the Church sincerely professes that all men, believers and unbelievers alike, ought to work for the rightful betterment of this world in which all alike live; such an ideal cannot be realized, however, apart from sincere and prudent dialogue."¹⁸ Calling for dialogue with those of no religion does not mean that the Church or our

¹⁴ <https://www.tmsg.org.au/about-tmsg/>

¹⁵ Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation."

¹⁶ Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation."

¹⁷ Markus Mannheim, "Census 2021 Data Shows Australians Are Less Religious and More Culturally Diverse Than Ever," ABC News, June 23, 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-28/census-2021-data-shows-a-changed-australia/101177152>.

¹⁸ Vatican Council II, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*," 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

province has relinquished its duty to proclaim the Good News. Proclamation of the Good News still remains central and summit of the church's mission and for that matter our province's. Dialogue and proclamation are intimately related but not interchangeable. In fact, our authentic dialogue with those of no religion presupposes our desire to proclaim Jesus to the world.¹⁹

For Everyone

In Matthew's gospel, initially, Jesus had limited the disciples' mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel and had forbidden them from going to the Gentiles or Samaritan territories (Mt 10:5). During his post-resurrection commissioning, Jesus sent them out again but this time, the mandate was to go make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19). In the Acts of the Apostles, he foretold that the disciples would be his witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). These passages demonstrate a clear shift from a geographically and ethnically limited mission to one that is expansive and all-inclusive. The mission of Jesus, in which believers now participate, transcends specific territories or groups. The mission is to be witnesses to the Light to all people irrespective of their race, gender, or social status. Pope John Paul II many years ago had highlighted this point by saying, because Jesus died for all and salvation is for all, this salvation must be made available for all.²⁰

St. Arnold Janssen from the beginning was clear in his mind that he wanted to start a missionary congregation that transcended the borders of Germany and Holland. His zeal for an international mission was discouraged even by some church leaders. The then Archbishop of Cologne is believed to have remarked after a meeting with Fr. Janssen, "Fr. Janssen was here today and wants to start a house for missionaries. He wants to convert pagans. Here in Cologne, there are enough pagans."²¹ Therefore, it is reasonable to say that our SVD mission from its onset had been for everyone and beyond borders. As Divine Word Missionaries, we prioritize spreading the Gospel in areas where it hasn't been heard, has been insufficiently heard, or where the local church isn't self-sustaining. Our primary mission is to reach all people.²²

¹⁹ Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation."

²⁰ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, Encyclical, 1990, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html.

²¹ Society of the Divine Word, "Divine Word Missionaries: The Founding Generation," <https://svdcuria.com/public/histtrad/founders/aj/ajen.htm>.

²² SVD Publications, "The Constitutions of the Society of the Divine Word," 2024, <https://svdcuria.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Constitutions-SVD.pdf>.

In the Australian Province, for example, we focus on Indigenous communities such as Palm Island, Santa Teresa, Alice Springs, Tiwi Islands, and Balgo, as well as Indigenous peoples in New Zealand, Thailand, and Myanmar. We also serve migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, the poor, and the marginalized in our mission areas, alongside faith seekers and people of goodwill from diverse backgrounds, spiritualities, and cultures.²³

Our SVD confrere, Christian Tauchner, highlights a “mission temptation” in his article, “Missio Dei-Challenged by Postmodernity.” This temptation arises when confreres limit their engagement by sticking to their own cultures. For instance, in our Australian context, when a Filipino confrere decides to stick to a Filipino community, a Ghanaian SVD to a Ghanaian community, a Vietnamese to a Vietnamese community, a Keralite to Keralites, an Indonesian to Indonesians, etc., there cannot be genuine dialogue with the local culture or even other cultures.²⁴ Interculturality impels us to transcend these comfort zones to engage with others, fostering true cross-cultural understanding and connection.

Moreover, one can sometimes hear some confreres opposing our taking on city parishes, and I believe this posture needs to be reevaluated. Regarding this point, writing about the European context, Tauchner suggests that “in our postmodern setting, among some European societies there is a growing ignorance of elementary religious knowledge,”²⁵ and this is equally true in Sydney, Melbourne, Bangkok, or Auckland. Today’s city dwellers can be as unevangelized as those who live in rural areas, and a city dweller is not beyond being saved. As a result, since our mission is for everyone, we can just as well be in the city parishes of Brisbane, Melbourne, Sydney, New Zealand, and so on, where people need to hear the Good News again.

Our Australia Province’s mission priority aligns with the Church’s mission priority: it is first and foremost to those who haven’t heard the Gospel yet and to those who have not properly heard it—that is, *missio ad gentes*.²⁶ In addition, Pope John Paul II draws our attention to another group of people, stating, “there is an intermediate situation, particularly in countries with ancient Christian roots, and occasionally in the younger Churches as well, where entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel. In this case what is needed is a ‘new evangelization’ or a ‘re-

²³ SVD Australia Province, “Our Vision and Mission,” <https://www.divineword.com.au/our-vision-and-mission>

²⁴ Christian Tauchner, “Missio Dei: Challenged by Postmodernity,” *Verbum SVD* 65, no. 4 (2024): 357, <https://svdcuria.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Verbum-SVD-65-4.2024.pdf>.

²⁵ Tauchner, “Missio Dei,” 357.

²⁶ *Redemptoris Missio*, 33.

evangelization.”²⁷ This situation is quite evident in almost all our cities and towns in our Australia Province. Our preference for rural areas and the marginalized is supreme and must remain as such, but nowhere does the Church or our SVD charism forbid us from witnessing to the light in the cities too.

Is our mission here in the Province meant to be solely *ad gentes*, as has been previously discussed? Fr. Pernia, while not denying that our mission is primarily *missio ad gentes*, offers a fresh and expanded interpretation of the term “*gentes*” when he says:

The “*gentes*”, therefore, are no longer only those who are out there, those who are outside. Often the “*gentes*” are also here among us and around us. It may be the family that lives next door, the person I sit beside in the bus, the young man who comes to fix my television, the lady in the market I buy vegetables from. Today, then, we speak no longer just of *missio ad gentes* but also of *missio inter gentes*.²⁸

This perspective is deeply enriching, as it avoids drawing a dichotomy between the recipients of the light we bring. With Fr. Pernia’s expanded understanding of the “*gentes*”, we can also say that every moment and encounter in our daily lives—wherever we meet the other—becomes an opportunity to share the light of Christ.

Conclusion

As we celebrate our congregation’s 150th anniversary, it’s vital to remember that we are witnesses of the Light, not the Light itself. Jesus is the true Light, and as a province, we are both bearers and seekers of this Light, who has always been present in the areas where we serve. We must know Him intimately to bring Him to others. Our mission must be undertaken in a spirit of co-responsibility and synodality, as all baptized individuals are called to let their light shine before others. This collaboration and co-responsibility must as well involve those who do not even share our beliefs and doctrines. As confreres of this province, we need to remind ourselves that is not solely the mission of priests, but of Jesus Himself. Ultimately, I suggest that this light should be brought to all people, not just those in our pews or those who share our cultural backgrounds and so our mission here in the Australia Province must be to the *gentes* but more importantly among the *gentes*.

²⁷ *Redemptoris Missio*, 33.

²⁸ SVD Publications, “A Word From Father General: Cross-Cultural Mission Revisited,” 2010, <https://svdcuria.com/members/infonews/newslet/cur/pdf/201n/an1011en.pdf>.

Jubilee Reflections in Mission Contexts within Australia Province

Deepening Our ‘SVD-ness’

Firminus Wiryono, SVD

SVD-ness. This sounds familiar to us, especially when we think of our identity, which uniquely differentiates us from other religious congregations. As we have recently inaugurated the Jubilee Year of the 150th anniversary of our beloved SVD, we, SVDs, are all invited to celebrate this special milestone with much more awareness of strengthening and deepening our core identity as SVD religious missionaries. This reflection is centered on a few essential aspects of living out our SVD-ness in light of the Jubilee theme, “*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone.*”

Witnessing to the Light: Through Us, with Us, and in Us

To me, the theme of witnessing to the Light is so profound. If we are to summarize our vision as SVDs, the theme puts it very well: to witness to the Light. Our SVD-ness is well expressed in allowing the Light to shine before others, as reflected in the theme of the 19th General Chapter. As our name is our mission, to witness to the Light means to witness to the Word. The ‘Word’ and the ‘Light’ are two interchangeable terms with the same meaning, pointing us to Christ as the Light. For me, as a Divine Word Missionary, I am convinced that the Light is witnessed through me, with me, and in me.

First of all, ‘*through us*’. Yes, we all know that we are not the Light, but the Light must shine through us. Just like the Word was made flesh in Jesus,

and so the Light makes its way by shining through us. Therefore, we are but the mediators of the Light, which also means that we are collaborators, enabling the Light to shine in the world.

Our SVD-ness is expressed in being collaborators in God's mission. Collaboration is a way of understanding and living our SVD identity. In collaborating with our mission partners, we need to know that we all are, first and foremost, the collaborators of God. Our collaboration with God impels us to collaborate with others. Here is the truth: we are encouraged to be truly "God's faithful and creative collaborators." Through us, as God's first collaborators, the Light finds its way to be in the world. Therefore, SVD-ness is characterized by our collaborative spirit that flows from our collaboration with God, empowering us to collaborate with others.

Secondly, '*with us*'. The word "with" seems simple but very significant. The Light shines with us, which means that witnessing to the Light can only be done with the Light Himself. I am a witness of the Light; however, I am not on my own, but with the Light. This means that we are not alone, and we don't have to do it alone. It is us with the Light. In doing mission, it is an important awareness that it is not about me, or solely my work, but it is about me with God for God's mission.

When we take part in God's mission, Jesus' mission becomes our mission, and therefore we can say that our mission is His mission. John reminds us to let Jesus increase, and ourselves decrease, to let His mission increase, and our small selves decrease. It is all about God's agenda, and not our own agenda. It is not all about us and our name, but it is about God and God's name. Because it is God's, therefore we can only do it with God, and God with us. The moment we claim it as our work or our business, we lose sight of the mission.

In doing God's mission, we tend to be unaware of "with" but instead claim it as mine or ours. Witnessing to the Light means that the Light is with us, and therefore we can only depend on the Light to reflect the Light. In other words, it is a call to participation. In fact, all that we do is to participate in God's mission, shining the Light to the world. Our SVD-ness is grounded on participation in God's mission and on giving oneself to God's purpose and mission.

Thirdly, '*in us*'. The term that can explain this way of witnessing to the Light is "in communion." In communion with Jesus the Light, we witness to the Light. This is very fundamental because the Light is in us. It is an acknowledgment of our unique union with the Light. Saint Paul puts it this way: "It's not I, but Christ who lives in me." And so, it is not I, but the Light which shines in me; in us.

Christ is already in and within us. We witness to the Light because the Light is already there within us. Our oneness with Christ, the Light, enables us to effectively witness to the Light, realizing that we can only witness to the Light if we ourselves have been illumined and transformed by the Light in us. Otherwise, the Light is only a label that is temporarily placed on us without being one with the Light. Therefore, our SVD-ness is well lived through our communion and oneness with the Word. Our SVD-ness is born through our intimate relationship with the Light.

From Everywhere for Everyone

Our SVD-ness is expressed through embracing the SVD culture. Our SVD culture is our SVD heritage, SVD spirituality, SVD way of life and doing mission, or our SVD way of being religious missionaries. Our SVD way differentiates us from other religious congregations. Perhaps the invitation for us today is to go back to the basics of being SVDs, the foundation of our identity.

We acknowledge that we are an international congregation. This 150th Jubilee celebration is a special time to acknowledge and celebrate our roots and the gift of our uniqueness and differences: we come from everywhere. We recognize the value and the beauty of both our differences and oneness, sharing the same identity as SVDs.

We also acknowledge that the greatest gift of our congregation is “us”: almost 6,000 confreres from everywhere. We need to have a strong sense of belongingness, that God’s loving grace has called and gathered us from everywhere, dedicating ourselves to everyone; to serve and reach out to everyone regardless of cultures, ethnicities, religions, or any differences. As Pope Francis affirms, the Church is for everyone—everyone and everyone—and we SVDs have been outstanding in committing ourselves to working and reaching out to everyone, all people.

In our Australia Province context, in light of our mission statement, we are reminded of reaching out to everyone, and at the same time giving priority to Indigenous peoples, migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, the poor, the marginalized, faith seekers, and people of good will from various spiritualities and cultures. That’s our mission. Our name is our mission: we are sent from everywhere for everyone. Rooted in the Word, witnessing to the Light, in a wounded world.

On the Formation and Future Mission of Divine Word Missionaries

Gusty Siga, SVD

The Divine Word Missionaries (SVD) are celebrating the Jubilee Year of 150 years under the theme, “*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone.*” In line with this, I, as an SVD student in the Australia Province, want to use this opportunity to reflect on my journey as a seminarian in the SVD and highlight how important formation is in the Divine Word Missionaries to help seminarians grow and be ready for their future mission, since the mission of the SVD is rooted in the call to spread the light of Christ universally, across cultural, social, and religious boundaries.

I have been part of SVD formation for the last eight years (half in Indonesia and half in Australia). I believe that the Divine Word Missionary formation is crucial to my preparation as a future missionary. It shapes me spiritually, intellectually, and personally, enabling me to be a true witness to the light of Christ. This formation process is not just about acquiring knowledge or skills but about becoming a living witness to the Light—someone who can carry the Gospel to “everyone, everywhere.” As I continue my journey, I am deeply grateful for the SVD formation and the way it helps me grow into the missionary life God has called me to.

Embracing Interculturality

One of the primary characteristics of the Divine Word Missionaries is their intercultural ministry approach. As a student preparing for missionary service, the SVD’s diversity and commitment to intercultural living provide a strong witness. Interculturality will become increasingly important in the future as the world becomes more interconnected. Pope Francis constantly calls on the Church to serve as a “field hospital” for people on the margins, and the SVD’s multicultural communities have the opportunity to respond. Understanding and respecting diverse cultures, languages, and traditions, as well as being living testimony to the universality of Christ’s love, allows them to transcend divisions.

SVD formation introduces me to a vibrant, intercultural community, reflecting the diversity of God’s creation. Living with seminarians from various cultural backgrounds has helped me appreciate that witnessing the light of

Christ means embracing diversity and learning to work in harmony with others. This experience mirrors the mission of the Divine Word Missionaries, where intercultural living is an essential aspect of our witness to the Gospel. This formation challenges me to grow in humility, openness, and adaptability, which are all crucial for the mission field, where understanding different cultural contexts is key to effective evangelization.

Deepening My Personal, Spiritual, Theological Understanding and Missionary Spirit

The formation provides me with the tools to deepen my relationship with Christ and to grow in my theological knowledge. Regular spiritual exercises such as prayer, meditation, and the Eucharist help me connect with Christ, the true Light that I am called to witness. Furthermore, the theological education I receive enriches my understanding of the faith and equips me to explain and defend it in various contexts. This intellectual and spiritual growth forms the foundation of my future missionary work, helping me to be a more effective witness to God's light.

I am constantly called to examine myself, my motivations, and my vocation. Formation offers me opportunities for personal growth, challenging me to confront my weaknesses and allowing God's grace to transform me. In doing so, I am being prepared not only to witness Christ's light but to become that light for others. This process of transformation is integral to my future mission, as I must embody the message I am proclaiming, living out the values of the Gospel in my interactions with others.

One of the core values that the SVD formation instills in me is the missionary spirit. The formation emphasizes that being a missionary is not just about preaching or doing social work; it is about living the Gospel every day, in every context, and with every person. This missionary spirit calls me to go beyond myself, to serve others, and to bring the light of Christ to the peripheries of society, whether they be geographical, social, or spiritual. The formation helps cultivate this spirit through its emphasis on service, community living, and pastoral experiences.

Witnessing in Marginalised society, Ecological Awareness, and Digital Mission

As a student, it is important to understand that the future mission of the SVD will continue to emphasize service to those on the margins of society—whether it be the poor, refugees, Indigenous peoples, or those who are excluded because of racial or ethnic discrimination. The theme of *“Witnessing*

to the Light” calls us to be present in these communities, offering solidarity and hope through both word and action. As future missionaries, students are being prepared to advocate for justice, peace, and the dignity of all people, particularly in settings of poverty and oppression. Our response to human suffering and injustice will be critical in showing that the Gospel of Christ is alive and relevant today.

Another key aspect of the future mission is the Church’s growing focus on ecological justice, as emphasized in Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’*. The Divine Word Missionaries, as caretakers of creation, must witness to the Light by advocating for the protection of the environment and supporting sustainable living, particularly in communities affected by environmental degradation. As a student, reflecting on how our mission can contribute to environmental stewardship involves understanding how the Gospel message calls us to care for God’s creation. In mission contexts, this could mean educating communities on ecological practices, advocating for climate justice, or simply living out a lifestyle that reflects respect for the Earth and its resources.

In the contemporary context, technology has reshaped communication, including how the Gospel is shared. The future mission of the Divine Word Missionaries will increasingly involve digital evangelization—reaching people through social media, online platforms, and digital communities. As a student, it is crucial to develop the skills to engage and communicate meaningfully in this digital mission space, where many people, especially younger generations, encounter their ideas and form their beliefs.

Preparing for Contemporary Missionary Challenges

In many countries, particularly in the West, the problem of secularization is significant. It is critical for a missionary to understand how to share the light of Christ in a world that is increasingly disinterested in religion. Witnessing to the Light in secularized countries requires practicing a genuine Christian life that appeals to people by personal example, dialogue, and acts of justice and mercy rather than outright proselytizing.

In pluralistic societies, the challenge is to respect religious differences while remaining firm in one’s Christian identity. The SVD has a strong tradition of dialogue, particularly in the context of interfaith relations. Future missionaries will need to engage in meaningful dialogue with people of other faiths, seeking common ground while also sharing the distinctive hope found in Christ. The future mission will also involve dialogue with secularists and non-religious persons, all while embodying the light of Christ in one’s actions.

Facing this issue, I realize that the SVD formation is preparing me to face the challenges of mission in the contemporary world. As society becomes more secularized and pluralistic, the role of a missionary becomes more complex. However, the SVD formation equips me with the skills and resilience needed to navigate these challenges. By engaging with current social issues, digital evangelization, and interreligious dialogue, I am being prepared to witness Christ's light in a way that is relevant and meaningful to modern society.

To conclude, as a student preparing for missionary work in the contemporary context, I firmly believe that the formation process involves not only deepening my theological knowledge but also fostering an openness to intercultural dialogue, learning from others, and embracing new contexts of mission. Ultimately, the theme, *"Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone,"* reminds me that the Gospel of Christ transcends boundaries. As a future missionary, my task is to carry this light, showing the world that it shines in every culture, language, and context, for the salvation and dignity of all people.

Illuminating the Path

Peter Wang, SVD

Over the past 10 years, my formation in both China and Australia has been guided by the love and guidance of Jesus Christ. In China, I witnessed the resilience and faith of the people, their unwavering devotion to the Gospel even in the face of challenges. This experience taught me the importance of perseverance and humility in my own spiritual journey. In Australia, I was exposed to a diverse and multicultural environment that broadened my understanding of the world and deepened my commitment to the SVD mission. Here, I learned to appreciate the beauty of different cultures and traditions, while also recognizing the universal call to bring the light of Christ to all people.

As I prepare for Perpetual Vows, I am increasingly aware of the responsibility that comes with this commitment. *"Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone"* calls me to be a light of hope and compassion, to shine the light of Jesus Christ in every corner of the world. The phrase

“Witnessing to the Light” reminds me of Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, whose words play a crucial role in our lives. We are called to share His love, compassion, and truth, spreading His light in every dark corner of the world. This is not just a witness, but a positive struggle that requires us to showcase our unique talents, challenge ourselves, and bravely spread the Gospel to those seeking justice and peace in the world.

The meaning of *“From Everywhere for Everyone”* highlights the broad and inclusive nature of our mission. In other words, it is “serving the world and benefiting everyone.” Our mission is not limited to one place or group, but spans across the globe, serving people of different races, cultures, and backgrounds. As an international society, we have undergone training, learning, and living together during our formation journey, which serves as an excellent model for sharing and extending our way of life with people in the world when we become missionaries in the future. Just like our mission transcends boundaries and embraces the entire human race with the love of God. Despite our different cultural backgrounds, we can come together in a spirit of collaboration and mutual respect. We are called to reach out to everyone, especially those who are most in need, such as Indigenous peoples, migrants, refugees, and the marginalized. This is a call for us to recognize the dignity and value of every individual, to see the shadow of Christ in every person. It is a good connection with our Catholic Social Teaching.

In this Jubilee year, I am reminded that our mission is not just about what we do but also about who we are becoming. As we strive to witness to the Light, we are transformed by it, becoming more like Christ in our thoughts, words, and actions. This transformation is a lifelong process, requiring us to remain open to the grace of God, to be humble learners, and to constantly seek His guidance and direction. I am grateful for the formation I have received, which has equipped me with the necessary tools to answer this call. The lessons I have learned in China and Australia have prepared me to serve the Church with an open heart and a steadfast spirit. I am ready to embrace the challenges and joys of my First Assignment, confident that the light of Christ will continue to guide me.

During this special year, we are called to be living witnesses of our faith, and this path is not a straight and narrow one, but one filled with twists and lessons. It demands that we continuously accept God’s sanctifying grace. Every act of kindness, every word of encouragement, and every moment of contemplation are part of our call to embody the image of Christ. As we become more like Christ, may we reflect His light more clearly, drawing others towards the source of hope and life. May our transformation serve as an eternal testament to the work of God’s grace within us, from now until forever.

Through the Lens of Justice, Peace & the Integrity of Creation

Jun Perez, SVD

When we talk about JPIC, it is not just about justice, peace, and ecology. It is the very core of our existence as human beings. These three components are intertwined with one another in order to achieve the fundamental values of our life.

We are living in a complex and wounded world where, indirectly, we are also responsible for it. The issues we are facing right now, whether societal or ecological, are the product of our indifference toward one another. We are called to break the bonds that divide us as citizens of this world, where we are all living on one planet that we call Earth.

One of the pressing issues that we need to address is that of refugees and migration. All of us dream of living in a peaceful environment where we can express ourselves freely, practice our religious beliefs, enrich our cultural heritage, and develop our given talents. But war, tribal conflict, and religious persecution can hinder our purpose in life. People have to leave their country of birth by force to save their lives. How can we listen to their cry, feel their anguish, and walk with them on a turbulent journey toward a welcoming community? How can we help in solving the problem of conflicts that inflict pain on the different facets of human life, as well as the other living organisms that are part of our system?

Poverty pushes people to seek greener pastures. No matter what it takes, they will find the land of milk and honey. Separation anxiety, culture shock, language barriers, and faith-based boundaries are the realities they have to endure to gain a brighter and better future for their loved ones. The inequality in the division of wealth separates the poor and the rich, the weak and the powerful, the master and the servant. If only we would see our fellow human beings as equal—where we help one another, build bridges instead of walls, and respect the uniqueness of every individual—then we could walk side by side, even hand in hand.

We human beings are not the only living species occupying the Earth. There are also other organisms that breathe the air we breathe. They are fashioned to balance our ecology. But the Earth is in danger because the stewards who are called to protect the environment are abusing it. We are now

experiencing the wrath of Mother Earth: unusual floods everywhere, severe heatwaves or cold waves, and melting glaciers that contribute to the rise in sea levels and the sinking of low-lying islands. What must we do to save the only planet that we can live on—our common home? It is our responsibility to take care of her, to nourish her, and to be her guardian.

It is our vocation to adhere to the integrity and dignity of our fellow human beings, as well as the integrity of God's creation. It is in our hands if we want to live in a peaceful, just, and humane society where the environment is protected and well kept. We have to co-exist on this green planet given to us.

Let There Be Light...and There Was Light: A Biblical Perspective

Elmer I. Ibarra, SVD

The first words of God in the Book of Genesis were: "Then God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." For me, as I reflect on the theme of our 150th founding anniversary as the biblical apostolate coordinator of the province, the Light is very powerful. In the first words of God in Genesis, one can clearly see not only the importance of light, but that in God's infinite wisdom, God chose to create light first. For God, in order to bring order and harmony to a world that was without form and shape, and where there was only darkness, God made light and called it "day."

This theme of light was continued in the prologue of St. John, one of the favourite Bible passages of our founder, St. Arnold Janssen, where St. John says, "Through him [the Word] was life, and this life was the light of the human race. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:4–5). From this, God sent a man named John to testify to the light (John 1:6). That's why I think we, as Divine Word Missionaries, are now tasked to continue—like John the Baptist—to testify to the Light. While we believe that the task of becoming a missionary is a call for everyone, as Divine Word Missionary priests and brothers, we are especially called to testify to the Light in the best way we know how, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In Mark 3:13–18, Jesus went up the mountain, summoned those He wanted, and appointed twelve whom He named apostles. While all twelve

were Jews, they clearly came from different backgrounds. Some of them were fishermen like Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Some were zealots like Simon and Judas Iscariot. One of them, Matthew, was a tax collector, and the rest came from different walks of life. We, as a congregation of almost 6,000 members from more than 70 countries, are definitely from “everywhere”. By the gift of God’s calling, we have responded like the disciples of Jesus—who came from everywhere—to do God’s mission and testify to the Light.

This diversity, which we all recognise as a gift, is something we celebrate in our congregation. “From everywhere” for us means that we bring into our mission the richness of each other’s cultures, languages, experiences, gifts, and many other blessings. Yet despite this diversity, we are united in the purpose of bringing the Divine Word to everyone we meet, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, all for the purpose of bringing the Light to everyone.

Lastly, as we come from everywhere, we witness to the Light for “everyone”. In the Great Commission of Jesus to His disciples at the conclusion of the Gospel of St. Matthew (Matthew 28:16–20), part of Jesus’ mandate to His disciples is: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). I remember that after years of formation in the seminary, our rector announced our mission assignments. In my batch, we were 13 seminarians, and among the 13, nine of us received mission assignments outside the Philippines, my home country. Some of us were sent to Congo, Madagascar, China (Taiwan), Argentina, Mexico, and Portugal—and I was assigned to Australia.

In my experience here in the Australia Province, I have tried to spread the Word of God in the suburbs of Wellington, New Zealand; in Western Sydney; and in the remote Aboriginal community of Santa Teresa, which is in the middle of the Simpson Desert in Central Australia. Now I’m here doing my ministry as rector of our formation house in Box Hill (Melbourne), Victoria. So I recognise my role of being a witness to the Light for everyone. I believe that all of us have had similar experiences in our missionary life.

In conclusion, I’ve always believed that as we celebrate our 150th founding anniversary, our theme brings us back to the purpose of why St. Arnold founded our congregation—and that is to be a witness to the Light like St. John the Baptist. Like St. John, we’re never the Light; we’re just witnesses who take delight in seeing the Light, which is the Divine Word. And in our delight, we want to point out the Light to everyone we meet so that we can give God glory. We do this so that, slowly but surely, the prayer of St. Arnold Janssen will come to fulfillment: *“May the darkness of sin and the night of unbelief vanish before the Light of the Word and the Spirit of Grace. And may the Heart of Jesus live in the hearts of all people. Amen.”*

“Witnessing to the Light” with the Arnoldus Family

Roger Kyan Thu, SVD

One heart, many faces—we have been called to serve Christ and one another. What a blessing to have the honour of celebrating the 150th Jubilee Year of our SVD existence! We definitely have a lot to celebrate looking back at the past 150 years of grace, struggles, and growth. As I just embarked on my first mission a few months ago, I don’t feel like I have a lot of ministerial experiences yet to share. Rather, I want to reflect on my encounter with the Light in the SVD over the past 10 years.

I thank God, the source of light, who in God’s providence guided me and brought me into the Arnoldus Family. I began to feel the call when I was in middle school. However, the Society was never on my radar since we didn’t have an SVD community in Myanmar at the time. My first time hearing about the name “SVD” was in early 2014. I was then a diocesan seminarian from my home diocese of Loikaw in Myanmar. At the time, I was just about to begin my philosophy studies at the national seminary in Myanmar. One day in February of 2014, I got news from my bishop that I was one of the two nominees to be sent to the US for study. Before sending us off, he called my companion and me to his office and told us that we were going to study at a college run by the SVD. He asked us if we wanted to join the SVD. Since we had not known anything about the SVD, we told him that we would rather go see it for ourselves first before giving him an answer.

We arrived at Divine Word College in Epworth, Iowa, in August 2014. My encounters with the SVDs at the college were very positive. To me, they were the most down-to-earth, welcoming, and friendly people I had ever met. They treated me as if I were their equal and long-time brother. The international students at DWC were also extremely friendly and supportive of me. Though this was my first time ever to be so far away from home, I quickly felt at home in a foreign land and fell in love with the community at the college. Those encounters for me were moments of encountering the Light. I felt loved, accepted, and welcomed by the community, and that made me a happy person who wanted to radiate that Light to those I encounter. After two years at college, my Burmese friend and I decided to join the SVD, and the rest is history.

Looking back at what led me to make the move, I can say with confidence and joy that community living—intercultural living in particular—comes to my mind front and centre. I began to see the blessings of and transformative power of being in an intercultural family. The SVD charism, in appreciation of cultural differences, enlightened me to see the beauty and value of every culture and communicate with people from different cultures with respect and openness to learn from them. Studying and living with confreres from different nations and cultures during my formation years has broadened my horizons and enriched my personal, spiritual, and intellectual life. I am very honoured and grateful to be part of the international and intercultural family of the SVD.

I am also thankful for our founder and predecessors who had a vision for the mission: to spread the Good News as an act of charity, and a vision of bringing us together as a family of brothers from different nations and cultures. I am inheriting the fruit of their sacrifices, labour, and legacy. I not only received wonderful formation and education programs, but also the priceless wisdom and lessons from their life stories. For instance, I feel that it is no coincidence that the political situation in Arnold's time somehow resembled the political situation we have been facing in my mission in Myanmar. Looking at this ongoing political unrest sometimes makes me feel discouraged. However, the legacy of Arnold's trust in the Triune God and his perseverance gives me hope and a sense of direction in this challenging time. The countless stories of our predecessors whose life stories I learned during my formation years continue to inspire me in my mission. Their stories of faith and resilience inspire me to move forward in hope and trust and to witness to the Light as they did so faithfully.

In celebrating our 150th Jubilee, we, as a society of one heart with many faces, are celebrating God's bountiful grace to our Society as well as the profound faith and generous responses of our predecessors. I feel a deep sense of gratitude to my predecessors, living and dead, who generously responded to God's call with deep trust and let the light of Christ shine through their lives. Their lives, faith, and sacrifices continue to remind me and inspire me to do the same: to respond to God's call generously and to allow the light of Christ to shine through my life in the midst of trials and challenges I encounter in the mission to serve Christ and one another.

A Personal Tribute to the SVD Mission in New Zealand

Sunil Nagothu, SVD

The Society of the Divine Word, popularly known as the Divine Word Missionaries (SVD), is celebrating 150 years of service in the Lord's Vineyard with the theme "*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*." It has grown from a humble foundation on September 8, 1875, in Steyl, the Netherlands, to an international religious order of 6,000 priests and brothers serving in 79 countries. In this context, I thought of sharing some of my personal experience of being part of the SVD mission in New Zealand, with the SVD confreres with whom I worked and some of the insights I gained along the way.

I was appointed in January 2000 to a parish called St Anne's Newtown in the Archdiocese of Wellington. I was not the first missionary assigned to the Wellington mission. I am aware of the pioneer missionaries who laid the path for future missionaries to come and be part of this great mission in Aotearoa.

I was appointed as an assistant priest to work with Fr Gerry Burns, a local diocesan priest. Gerry, out of his personal interest, joined the St James Mission Society and served as a missionary in Peru for a few years. I was fortunate to have worked with him, as his outlook as a parish priest was different from others. He was a great mentor, and I learned many valuable lessons for my future missionary work. It was in St Anne's parish that I met for the first time many people from the Pacific Islands. This is where I was challenged to re-think some of my preconceived ideas about priestly ministry. This is also where I gained confidence about the concept of collaborative leadership, concern for social justice issues, and the formation of laity in our parishes.

My own experience is just one of many in the SVD's mission to Aotearoa New Zealand. And, as we celebrate the SVD's 150th Jubilee Year, we remember all those who have been witnesses to the light of Jesus Christ in this part of the world. Certainly, the Jubilee theme of being "*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*" rings true for the mission in NZ. Not only did our SVD missionaries come from many nations around the world, but we also ministered with people from many places, especially around the South Pacific, and we were all the richer for this exchange of culture. In the context of New Zealand (Aotearoa), biculturalism refers to the unique relationship

between the indigenous Māori people and the other ethnicities that call this land their home.

In 1985, just over 40 years ago, Bishop Denis Browne of Auckland invited the Divine Word Missionaries from Australia to work among disadvantaged young people in his archdiocese. The first three SVDs to take up this challenge were Bill Burt from Australia, Johnny Cervania and Vic Cisneros, both from the Philippines. They lived in Otara, where they ran a youth hostel which operated as an alternative residence for young offenders. Later they were joined by Paul Kanda, the first Papua New Guinean Divine Word Missionary. The SVDs are presently represented in Auckland by Alejandro de la Sotta Dominguez, who is parish priest of St Bernadette's Parish, Mt Wellington, as well as chaplain to the Latin American Community.

Not long after the mission in Auckland began, the Divine Word Missionaries accepted Cardinal Tom Williams' invitation to work also in the Archdiocese of Wellington. Two priests, Michael Madigan from Ireland and Cesar Espineda from the Philippines, joined the Archdiocese's youth ministry team with an energetic young diocesan priest, John Dew (who later went on to become the Archbishop of Wellington and a Cardinal). In 1985, the SVD took responsibility for St Michael's Parish, Taita. The Divine Word Missionaries served there until 2005. They then took up the pastoral care of St Patrick's Parish, Wainuiomata.

In the following years, the Archdiocese of Wellington witnessed some structural changes, as parishes were amalgamated to provide better service for the changing face of those communities. The Archdiocese also placed a strong emphasis on empowering lay people to live out their baptismal calling through a collaborative leadership model. The Divine Word Missionaries are now responsible for the two expanded parishes which embrace Te Awakairangi, parish based at Lower Hutt, and Te Wairua Tapu, based at Petone. Many priests from around the world have been members of the SVD team in the Wellington Archdiocese, including Sunil Paul, Ho Tran, Raymond Soriano, Andrew, Stef Ndun, Joseph Vu, Elmer Ibarra, Albano Da Costa, Linh Nguyen, Marlon Maylon, John Quang, Alejandro de la Sotta Dominguez, Akuila Taliauli, Raja Kommareddy, and Uili Uvea.

For many years, Bernard Espiritu, a Divine Word Missionary originally from the Philippines, was the National Director of the Pontifical Mission Societies (PMS), ministering in close collaboration with all six dioceses in NZ. There are just two NZ-born Divine Word Missionaries: Michael Hardie, who is a member of the SVD Australia Province, based in Sydney, and Philip Gibbs, who is the president of the Divine Word University in Madang, Papua New Guinea.

When I look back over the 40 years of SVD presence in New Zealand, still a district within the Australia province, I can see that the mission has been true to our apostolic charism and a lot has been accomplished in terms of serving culturally diverse and multi-ethnic communities, and the province has been enriched by what we have received from multi-cultural faith communities.

Each in our own way, we have tried to be faithful and creative witnesses to Christ's light and to encourage and empower the people to be Witnesses to the Light within and among them. As missionaries from many countries, working in a multicultural landscape, we have embodied the theme, "*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*," but have also had the gift of receiving the richness of faith, cultural dialogue, and interculturality from the communities in which we have been sent and continue to be present. May this Jubilee Year be a time of celebration and thanksgiving for 40 years of SVD mission in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

The Mission in the Tiwi Islands

Niran Veigas, SVD

"How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Romans 10:15).

As a Divine Word Missionary, it is my profound privilege to share the Good News of God wherever I am called. For nine years, I was blessed to proclaim the Gospel in Russia, answering the Lord's invitation to be His instrument of love and hope. Following this, I embraced another calling—to serve the Aboriginal community in Australia.

For the past two years, I have had the honour of ministering to a remote Aboriginal community in the northernmost part of Australia. It has been a journey of grace and growth, where I feel truly blessed to bring the Good News of Christ to those who long for His presence. Witnessing their faith, resilience, and openness to the Gospel has deepened my own commitment to this sacred mission.

Bathurst Island, part of the Tiwi Islands, lies off the northern coast of Australia's Northern Territory. Along with its sister island, Melville, it is home to the Tiwi people, one of the region's most vibrant and culturally rich

Indigenous communities. Known for their unique traditions, art, and spirituality, the Tiwi people have preserved a strong connection to their land, language, and customs despite the challenges of modernity.

The Tiwi community is deeply spiritual, blending traditional beliefs with the Christian faith introduced by Catholic missionaries in the early 20th century. The arrival of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC) in 1911 marked the beginning of a profound relationship between the Catholic Church and the Tiwi people. Fr. Francis Xavier Gsell, MSC, laid the foundation for the mission at Bathurst Island, emphasising respect for Tiwi traditions while introducing the teachings of Christ. The Divine Word Missionaries (SVD's) ventured into this mission in 2022 on the request of the Diocese of Darwin, when the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart left the island.

Being a missionary, it has been a privilege to serve in the Tiwi people, and each day has brought new opportunities to learn and grow within the Aboriginal community, especially by experiencing their rich traditions and cultures.

Witnessing to the Light in the Tiwi Context

Living interculturality

The SVD charism emphasises living in intercultural communities. In the Tiwi Islands, this means engaging with the rich traditions and culture of the Tiwi people while fostering unity in Christ. By immersing themselves in Tiwi culture, SVD missionaries not only bring the Gospel but also learn from the community's wisdom, spirituality, and connection to the land. This mutual exchange exemplifies "*from everywhere for everyone*".

Evangelisation through SVD presence

SVD missionaries witness to the Light not only by preaching but through their consistent presence in the community, offering pastoral care, celebrating sacraments, and participating in daily life. In communities facing challenges like social disconnection or identity crises, the sacrament of reconciliation and listening to the pains of the people and offering to God can bring the light of healing and hope.

Promoting inclusivity and intercultural dialogue

The SVD ministry in the Tiwi Islands can serve as a bridge between Aboriginal traditions and the teachings of the Catholic Church, fostering mutual

understanding and respect. By engaging the elders and community leaders in shaping parish activities, the mission aligns with the SVD's commitment to dialogue and inclusivity.

Building faith through relationships

Witnessing to the Light in the Tiwi Islands involves walking alongside the community in their joys and struggles. This means being present for significant moments in their lives—births, marriages, and funerals—while sharing the light of Christ through compassionate accompaniment.

Empowering Tiwi leadership

Lay Leadership is much talked about in our SVD congregation. Encouraging Tiwi parishioners to take active roles in Parish Council Leadership. This leadership allows them to have the understanding that they are very much part of the decision making in the church. Involvement of the lay leadership in our parish allows us to bring the light of Christ in our local communities.

Some Challenges

Cultural integration

The Tiwi people have a profound connection to their Dreamtime spirituality, which forms the foundation of their worldview, customs, and connection to the land. Dreamtime stories, songs, and ceremonies are not only spiritual expressions but also a means of preserving their history, identity, and relationship with creation.

When integrating these rich traditions with the teachings of the Catholic Church, missionaries must exercise great sensitivity, respect, and patience. It requires deep listening to understand how Tiwi spirituality aligns with Christian values and finding pathways for these traditions to coexist within the framework of Catholic liturgy and practices.

Bridging generational gaps

The Tiwi Islands face a growing cultural divide between elders and youth. Elders, as custodians of tradition and spirituality, may feel disconnected from younger generations, who are more influenced by modern technology and external cultural trends. Missionaries must navigate these generational differences, foster mutual understanding, and encourage both groups to engage with faith in ways that resonate with their perspectives.

Geographical isolation

The Tiwi Islands' remote location presents significant challenges for missionaries. Access to the islands often requires specialised transport, such as small planes or ferries, which can be affected by weather conditions or logistical constraints. This isolation makes it difficult for missionaries to obtain necessary resources, such as basic provisions to sustain their work and ministry.

Moreover, the physical isolation of the islands can create a sense of emotional and professional isolation for missionaries. The absence of a broader support network may lead to feelings of loneliness or burnout, particularly when they are faced with the demanding task of balancing spiritual, cultural, and social needs in the community. Despite these challenges, missionaries find strength in their calling, relying on faith and the close-knit relationships they develop with the Tiwi community.

Cultural misunderstandings

Even with the best intentions, missionaries working in the Tiwi Islands may inadvertently misinterpret or overlook key aspects of Tiwi culture, resulting in misunderstandings or resistance from the community. The Tiwi people have a rich spiritual worldview and traditions that are deeply embedded in their daily lives. Misalignments can arise when these traditions are not fully understood or respected within the context of missionary efforts.

Overcoming these Challenges*Building trust*

To witness to the Light, trust must first be established. This involves being a consistent, compassionate presence in the Tiwi community. Through acts of love and service, missionaries demonstrate that the Gospel is not a foreign imposition but a message of hope that values and uplifts Tiwi traditions. Trust is cultivated when missionaries respect the sacred stories and customs of the Tiwi people, showing the same care Christ had for every person He encountered.

Mutual learning

The theme "*From Everywhere for Everyone*" emphasises mutuality in mission. Missionaries are not merely teachers but also learners, absorbing the wisdom of the Tiwi culture while sharing the light of Christ. This humility

reflects the Gospel's universal truth: every culture carries a unique reflection of God's image. When missionaries learn from the Tiwi people—such as their profound connection to the land—they grow in their ability to make the Gospel relevant and meaningful.

Engaging with people

By actively listening to and working with elders, missionaries foster a collaborative relationship that deeply respects the spirituality, traditions, and cultural identity of the Tiwi people. This collaboration reflects the unity of the Church in its diversity, where each culture contributes its unique expression to the Body of Christ. When missionaries engage authentically, they affirm that Christ's light shines through every culture, reinforcing a faith that is both universal and deeply personal to the Tiwi community.

Flexibility in ministry

Being open to adapting liturgical celebrations and programs embodies the principle of *"From Everywhere for Everyone."* The Gospel message remains the same, but its expression can take on the beauty and vibrancy of the Tiwi culture. For example, incorporating Tiwi art, music, and language into Mass creates a sense of ownership and belonging for the community, showing that the light of Christ shines through their heritage.

Open dialogue

Christ's ministry was marked by His readiness to engage in honest and transformative dialogue, even with those who misunderstood or opposed Him. This approach is deeply relevant to the ministry in the Tiwi Islands, where open and respectful conversations can bridge divides, resolve conflicts, and deepen relationships. Through dialogue, missionaries reflect Christ's example of listening with compassion, offering hope, and creating spaces for understanding to flourish.

In the Tiwi context, dialogue with children and youth holds special significance. Many young people face challenges such as identity crises, social pressures, and disconnection from both faith and culture. Engaging them in meaningful conversations helps address these struggles, showing them that they are valued and heard. Initiatives like the "Children's Club" play a pivotal role in this mission. Held every Sunday, the club creates a welcoming and supportive environment where children and youth feel at home in the church.

This practice of dialogue extends beyond words—it is about presence,

patience, and walking alongside people in their journey. By fostering a culture of open communication, engaging youth in faith-based programs, and reaching out to those in need, missionaries embody Christ's mission, building a community where everyone feels respected, valued, and filled with hope. In doing so, the light of Christ shines brighter, bringing unity and healing to the Tiwi Islands.

Conclusion

The theme, "*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*," calls us to embrace a mission rooted in inclusivity, mutual respect, and unwavering hope. On the Tiwi Islands, this mission unfolds uniquely, enriched by the vibrant traditions, spirituality, and resilience of the Tiwi people.

Amid challenges like cultural integration, generational divides, geographical isolation, and misunderstandings, the Divine Word Missionaries (SVD) find inspiration in the Gospel's universal truth: that Christ's light transcends all boundaries, illuminating every culture and heart. By fostering trust, engaging in mutual learning, and adapting ministry practices, the light of the Gospel is shared in ways that resonate deeply with the Tiwi community.

This ministry is not just about bringing faith to the Tiwi people but also about receiving the gifts of their culture, spirituality, and wisdom. It is a mutual journey of transformation where the light of Christ shines brighter through unity in diversity.

As we continue to witness to the Light in the Tiwi Islands, we are reminded that mission is not merely a task but a way of life—a life that reflects God's love and builds a faith-filled community where every person, regardless of their story or background, feels valued, empowered, and loved. In this spirit, we remain committed to carrying the light of Christ "*from everywhere for everyone*".

Part Two
Perspectives in
Mission, Education and Research

Leadership in the SVD as an International Missionary Congregation and the Participation of the Indonesian Members

Paulus Budi Kleden, SVD

Leadership is seen as one of the five important aspects of life and ministry of an SVD missionary, in addition to spirituality, community, finance, and formation. This was outlined in the 16th General Chapter of the SVD in 2006.¹ There are two reasons for this. Firstly, because being a religious missionary always means taking part in the task of leadership. In addition to baptism conferring on every Christian a participation in Christ's task of leadership, the vows that bind a person in a religious community carry with them the consequence of assuming responsibility for the whole life and mission of the community (Constitutions 604). The ideal and practice of subsidiarity-participative leadership is part of the history of religious life. Secondly, because the members live concretely in communities, there is a need for leaders who are in charge of animating the members in consecrated life, coordinating missionary service and administering the things necessary for life and work. Although not entirely, the quality of leadership has an influence on the quality of life and ministry as religious and missionaries.

These two thoughts are also the reason for writing this article on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the SVD. Firstly, as an occasion for renewal of commitment, this celebration is also a good time to reflect on the extent to which the life and mission of the SVD members, individually and as a congregation, take part in the task of leadership in the midst of the people, meaning the extent to which our lives as religious missionaries have

¹ "Documents of the XVI General Chapter SVD 2006," in *In Dialogue With the Word* 6/September 2006 (Roma: SVD Generalate Publications, 2006).

encouraged people to become mature in faith, take responsibility in the life of the Church, and together with them strive for a decent life as human beings. Secondly, this celebration invites us to look back into history, and there we will find figures who have been entrusted with leadership. While not without fault, they have helped shape and define the history of our congregation and its missionary work over the past hundred and fifty years. Now, the trust is given to us both to be leaders and to prepare the leaders of our union. As the quantity of Indonesian SVDs becomes larger, our contribution in the field of leadership is also expected.

Based on the above reasons, this reflection is pursued in three steps. Firstly, we will look at Arnold Janssen's concept and praxis of leadership. From there, in the second step we will explore some of the main dimensions of religious leadership in an international missionary congregation like the SVD. The third step is to look at the development of the participation of the Indonesian SVDs in the leadership service of the congregation.

Arnold Janssen as a Leader

When working as a teacher in his home diocese of Muenster, Germany, Arnold Janssen showed no outstanding leadership talents. Indeed, his proficiency in maths and physics could be called rare among the priests of the diocese of Muenster. However, despite being entrusted with many subjects, he was never placed in one of the favourite schools. And even in the less prominent schools, he was never a homeroom teacher. He was better known as "*der kleine Herr*" (The Little Master).² He was not a priest who was admired and who was expected to be a leader. Nevertheless, his meticulousness as a maths teacher and his diligence in teaching were qualities that later served him well when he became the leader of the congregations he founded.

Arnold Janssen's leadership talent began to manifest when he organised the prayer apostolate for the diocese of Muenster and published the apostolate bulletin. He received an offer from the director of the apostolate while attending the organisation's meeting in Salzburg. At first, Arnold Janssen wondered why he had been asked. Then he carefully considered whether he was up to the task. Finally, he accepted and took it seriously. These three stages seem to have coloured many important decisions in his life, becoming part of his experience as a leader.

² Stefan Ueblackner, *Arnold Janssen: Ein Leben im Dienst der Weltkirche* (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag), 12.

The first is the feeling of wonder as to why he was entrusted to do something he had not imagined before. The question that arises is: Is such an offer really from the heart? Are people not playing tricks on himself by making such an offer? Do people really have good intentions with such offers? Or is the person just trying to bring him down by giving him a position, from which he will get a higher position to fall deeper? These series of questions help to assess the concrete need at hand. Is there really a need? If there is a need, then there must be someone who is willing to fulfil that need. It is not the leader who looks for a position, it is the need that seeks a leader.

The second step is to make a careful judgement about one's capabilities. Arnold Janssen asked himself seriously whether he was indeed gifted to carry out a task. He also took a lot of time to reflect on whether a decision he was contemplating was the best and right one for a particular person at a particular time. Making spontaneous decisions was not his habit. This long discernment is not always easy for someone who is waiting for a decision. However, for him, careful consideration is needed so that the decision taken is truly the best one, of which he is convinced that it is in accordance with God's will. Helena Stollenwerk had to wait seven years before Arnold Janssen finally fulfilled his promise to found a missionary congregation for women in 1889. When deciding on the first assignment of newly ordained deacons in St Gabriel's, Mödling, Austria, in 1908, a year before his death, Arnold Janssen pondered for a long time, despite the urging of Nikolaus Blum and the other members of the General Council in Steyl to send his decision as soon as possible. He knew that this decision would have a great influence on the life of the young confreres concerned, on the mission of the Society in a certain area, and on the work of the Church as a whole.³

The third thing is consistency in carrying out a decision. Because he took sufficient time to reflect before making a decision, Arnold Janssen did not easily change a decision. If he was certain that what he had decided was what he recognised as God's will, he would not back down even if he had to deal with people's opposing views. This kind of conviction made Arnold Janssen known as a stubborn and uncompromising person. That did not mean he was unwilling to listen to others. He talked and listened to people during the

³ "Where does God intend to send each of them? What is best if we consider all aspects? What talents did Fr. A have? And Fr. B? Where are there still shortcomings? What talents did Fr. A have? And Fr. B? Where are there still shortcomings? Where can Fr. C develop most optimally?" Then he looked at the letters of request from the mission lands: Which needs are there? Ah, there are so many birds crying out for help! And, of course, everywhere they want the best possible friar, understandably - while we can only send the friars God has entrusted to us! (Sixta Kasbauer, *Ein Mensch unter Gottes Meißel: Arnold Janssen, Gründer des Steyler Missionswerkes* (Steyler Verlag, 1959), 340-41).

deliberation process. However, when the decision was made, it was almost futile to expect him to reconsider the decision.

From the above three points, it can be said that Arnold Janssen was not a man who pursued leadership as a position. He knew very well his weaknesses. When it came to starting the missionary congregation, he knew from experience that being a leader is not easy. Every initiative taken would inevitably bring more reasons for headaches than praise. However, he was convinced of the importance of establishing a mission house, and that it was God's will. And he also realised that such a house needed a leader. It was not out of ambition to take a position that he finally started something, but out of conviction of the need for it. There must be a mission house, there must be someone to start it, and there must be a leader. The mission house will fail if there is no one in charge of leadership. This conviction made him unshakeable.

This attitude inevitably exposed him to a number of difficulties. Already in the first year, Arnold Janssen experienced a challenge that shook him to the core and which put the whole plan of establishing a missionary congregation in jeopardy. Two of his three original followers withdrew because they felt they could not co-operate with him. He was too strict. Matters were further complicated when Dr. von Essen, his colleague, also felt he could no longer hold out. In a letter, von Essen declared his intention to break away from Janssen and found his own way to establish a mission house. He did not accept that Arnold Janssen understood himself to be the leader of the mission house in Steyl and demanded obedience from those who followed him. To him, this move only showed Arnold Janssen's arrogance. Von Essen realised that the mission house needed a leader, but Janssen was not the right one. The house staff alone were unmanageable, let alone the seminarians and priests who joined. In his opinion, Janssen did not exude the necessary authority of a leader, while strong leadership is what is needed in the early stages of a major endeavour. Therefore, von Essen concluded his letter by recommending that Arnold Janssen pray a lot that God would send a gifted priest to Steyl to be the leader there. Otherwise, this endeavour would have no future, for from the very beginning it had the seeds of destruction in it, namely hubris.⁴

However, Janssen calmly accepted these accusations and insults. He realised that every organisation faces shocks and challenges. The quality of an organisation is not determined by the presence or absence of problems and tensions, but by the way the challenges are met. To find the right way out of the tension, he asked the seminarians to pray that the mission house would be given the right leader. In addition, he waited for the decision of the bishop,

⁴ Kasbauer, *Ein Mensch unter Gottes Meißel*, 89.

who had the authority to give the final word after hearing the arguments of all parties involved. He learnt that there are others who have the authority to give the final word on certain issues. Eventually the bishop gave his decision: Janssen became the superior of the mission house.

What followed was bittersweet: those early colleagues decided to quit. Arnold Janssen learnt from his problems with the early colleagues who withdrew. Despite the bitterness of their decision, Janssen decided to accompany Bill when he took his leave from Steyl.⁵ As a leader, Janssen knew how to place his personal feelings in order to fulfil his responsibilities. He did not get carried away with his feelings and endeavoured to ensure that all those who decided to leave would still experience proper treatment and retain good memories of the mission house.

In the early years, this stubbornness proved essential. The beginning of a great work that is still finding its shape requires people who are willing to assume all responsibility, because in all the uncertainty, it is easy to blame each other.

From 1875 to 1885, Arnold was the sole leader at Steyl. Along the way, Arnold Janssen had to learn to delegate tasks and to negotiate with the members of the General Council. For Janssen, this was not easy. It was not easy for him to give the leadership of the congregation to someone else. When he decided to form a European province and authorise the provincials to organise things, Arnold Janssen had to think long and hard. Likewise, when he had a number of members in the General Council of the congregation, he needed time to change the habit of making decisions himself. However, with delegation or collegiality in leadership, Arnold Janssen's earnestness did not diminish. He still took time to consider matters and gave others time to do the same. He realised the importance of collegial consideration. About the council members who were often stubborn in their opinions, Janssen once said, "Under certain conditions this has a positive rather than negative influence. This does not prevent the Superior General from endeavouring to reach a consensus when making important decisions. He is constantly trying, but not always achieving results."⁶

Arnold Janssen is a strategic visionary. After reflecting and being sure of what God's will was, he began to think of the concrete steps needed to achieve that goal. For that, he needed people, his Brothers and Sisters. But it was not just about having people. What was more important was to put someone in the right place so that they could truly serve the needs of the entire congregation.

⁵ Kasbauer, *Ein Mensch unter Gottes Meißel*, 87.

⁶ Udo Haltermann, *Arnold Janssen: Ein Glaubender geht seinen Weg* (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1984), 51–52.

For that, a good knowledge of the person was very necessary. That was why, before appointing someone as rector, Arnold Janssen prayed, reflected, brainstormed, and then dialogued with the person concerned.

Included in determining the steps to realise his vision of the congregation is preparing leaders. Although it was not easy for him to hand over authority over the congregation to someone else, he had to think of the transfer of authority as an inevitable reality. When deciding on the rectors for St. Gabriel and Steyl a few years before his death, one of his motives was to prepare his own brother to succeed him. When Fr. Wegener, the future rector of St. Gabriel, objected to this plan, Arnold Janssen said, "It is not for me to decide who will succeed me. The Chapter will decide. However, I am obliged to prepare candidates, and not just one, but several. And those candidates must first learn, by being house rectors, giving conferences, connecting love and firmness, also learning to speak the truth to those who must hear it. Now I choose you both, Fr. Blum for Steyl and yourself for St. Gabriel. What will happen next, we will see."⁷

Convincing someone to accept the task of leadership is not easy. People generally object to it. Especially if people use others as a benchmark to judge their own abilities, it is easy to see themselves in the shadow of those they admire. In addition to Wegener's objections, Arnold Janssen's request was not easily accepted by Josef Freinademetz, whom he planned to be the leader of the SVD mission in China in Anzer's place while Anzer travelled to Europe. Freinademetz wrote to Arnold Janssen, "I was not created to be the leader of a mission. I have no keen eye for practical matters, no energy, not many ideas. I am inferior to all the other confreres with regard to virtues. Only in one respect did I excel them, namely that I was born a few years before them and so was able to go to the mission field first. This is, of course, an advantage that counts for nothing... I would be very happy if Fr. Rector could appoint someone else to be the leader here."⁸

True to his character, Arnold painstakingly and patiently wrote a long letter, trying to convince Freinademetz. He was convinced that some people were born leaders, but most people became leaders because they were given the opportunity or because circumstances demanded it. As he himself had experienced, in life in general, including in religious life, people do not assume a leadership role because there is a leader. It is not the leader who is the reason for the leadership task. Rather, it is because a leader is needed that someone is sought and appointed for the task. Therefore, we do not have to wait until a

⁷ Kasbauer, *Ein Mensch unter Gottes Meißel*, 245.

⁸ Fritz Bornemann, *Der Selige Josef Freinademetz, 1858–1905: Ein Steyler China-Missionar* (Roma: Apud Collegium Verbi Divini, 1976), 93.

person feels fully prepared for an office to ask him or her to carry out the task. This can happen in political leadership, and therefore people campaign for leadership. In religious leadership, preparation is necessary, but it is rare for people to feel very prepared. Therefore, a religious leader is appointed in the expectation that they grow with the responsibility given to them. And this growth is in the company of the Holy Spirit. Arnold Janssen wrote to Freinademetz: "Rest assured that the Holy Spirit will enlighten, strengthen and encourage you as you accept this task in obedience, for the glory of God and the good of our brothers and sisters."⁹ For Janssen, this is not just some empty, made-up consolation for someone who is facing the difficulties of accepting a new assignment. Janssen spoke from his own experience, that God was with the congregation also through leaders who have limitations and are aware of their shortcomings.

Janssen himself honestly recognised his shortcomings; and this became a reason for him to increasingly submit himself and the entire congregation to the guidance of the Spirit. The most fundamental thing was to endeavour to do what could be done. Thus, to Fr. Heinrich Hahn he wrote, "I totally agree that I am not as good as I should be. However, is the congregation my work? Is it not the work of God Himself? Besides, I have always honestly tried to carry out God's will. Hopefully He will help me to overcome the things that people don't like about me."¹⁰

This does not mean, however, that Arnold Janssen did not consider a number of qualities important for a leader. Some basic attitudes need to be acquainted in order for the ministry of leadership to truly fulfil its purpose. If a leader feels lacking in any of these, he needs to train himself and pray for it.

A good leader needs to have a lot of patience, friendliness, wisdom and courage. He needs to be patient, so that he can still display maturity even when he is being insulted or troubled by others. He needs to be hospitable in order to think well of others in every situation and try to love those who dislike him until they realise their mistake. Wisdom is needed to discern when to speak and when to remain silent. Courage, to be able to keep and defend right principles.¹¹

For Arnold Janssen, one of the most important tasks of a leader is to confirm the confreres in missionary work and religious life, especially who are undergoing crisis. Crisis is an experience often faced by people who have

⁹ Bornemann, *Der Selige Josef Freinademetz*, 94.

¹⁰ Arnold Janssen to Heinrich Hahn, 1903, in Josef Alt, *Journey in Faith: The Missionary Life of Arnold Janssen* (Roma: Apud Collegium Verbi Divini, 2002), 808.

¹¹ Alt, *Journey in Faith*, 808.

pledged allegiance. Various reasons can lead people to crisis. Faced with those in crisis, Arnold Janssen advised: "... you must endeavour to help him.... with great patience and wisdom. You are bound by the obligation to love him and care for him. Therefore, do your duty with patience ... Be patient in the face of small faults."¹²

A few things seem interesting from the last quote above. Firstly, people in crisis should be helped. A crisis is not a mistake or violation that should be punished. The best way for a leader to help a person in crisis is to show openness, so that the person is brave and willing to convey the problem at hand. In fear there will be no honesty. Secondly, love is an obligation. Loving one another is not simply a matter of whether one likes it or determined by waves of feelings but must be a conscious decision. This decision can help people to overcome self-enslavement by emotions and act rationally. Rationality is not the enemy of love. Thirdly, Janssen was convinced of and repeatedly emphasised the importance of attention to rules. But at the same time, he felt the need to show proportionality. Not all offences carry the same weight.

Leadership Tasks

The 16th and 17th General Chapters of the SVD gave considerable attention to the theme of leadership. Leadership is one of the five essential elements that shape the life and mission of the SVD. While the 17th general chapter in 2012 concentrated on action plans and therefore strategies, the 16th chapter dealt with basic issues such as leadership vision, strengths and weaknesses, challenges, and some practical suggestions. Here I would like to discuss the three so-called main tasks of leadership in the SVD. As mentioned in the introduction to the section of the 16th General Chapter document that talks about leadership, the task of prophetic leadership, understood as leadership in "solidarity, respect and love," is carried out by both those who have an office and those who do not have an office (53.54).

Leading Means Dialogue and Decision

The SVD Constitutions affirms: "All share the responsibility for our religious-missionary life and work. Superiors then should continually seek fraternal discussion of common concerns, consult with confreres and weigh their opinions so that united in prayer they may discern the will of God" (Constitutions 606). All confreres are responsible in a spirit of solidarity for the

¹² Arnold Janssen, *Excerpts from Correspondence with his First Missionaries*, 15.

whole congregation and for its ministries (Constitutions 603; 606); with honest fraternal love we are to show love and concern for one another and should endeavour to help and encourage one another (Constitutions 303).

The above constitutional statement indicates two things that leaders in the congregation need to do: dialogue, which means talking and listening, and decision-making. Dialogue, in keeping with the nature of consecrated life and reinforced in the 2006 Chapter on dialogical leadership, is based on the awareness that the congregation is the common property of all members and on the belief that all members are equipped with the spirit and clear mind to work towards the realisation of the congregation's vision and mission.

Dialogue does not carry the consequence that what one confrere wants must be implemented. The authority to decide remains with the leader, after honestly and properly considering what the members think and want. Although it is not always easy, one thing that is essential to the task of leadership is decision-making and decision-taking. Leadership positions are always related to decision-making and decision-taking.

According to the SVD Constitution, there are three kinds of decisions taken by leaders at different levels. The first is called a collegial decision. For this decision, the leader, whether Superior General, Provincial or Rector, together with all the members of the council take a joint decision and the decision is based on a majority vote. For example, the Rector and the house council take a joint decision to submit to the Provincial council its recommendation to reject the renewal of vows of a confrere in temporary vows (Constitution 637.3); the decision of the Provincial and his council to recommend a person for perpetual vows and ordination and submit it to the Superior General and his council (Constitution 630.2); the decision of the Superior General and his council to elect and appoint a vice Superior General when a vacancy occurs (Constitution 619.10). Second, deliberative decisions. These are decisions of the superior that must be approved by the members of the council. The superior cannot act against the opinion of his council, but can do nothing with regard to the matter decided, meaning he can leave things in the *status quo*. For example, a house rector needs the consent of his council when deciding on house rules (Constitution 638.1); a Provincial decree to set the number of councillors of a community or district (Constitution 630.3); a Superior General decree to create or dissolve a province (Constitution 619.9). The last is called a consultative decision. Here, the leader must seek the opinion of his council, but he is not bound by that opinion. However, it is reminded that he cannot simply ignore the opinion of the council. For example, a house rector when appointing or dismissing the head of a workshop, as long as this

is not reserved for a higher leader (Constitution 638.1), the Provincial's decision relates to the provincial residence (Constitution 629.2).

Three Tasks of Leadership

The task of animation

A religious institute has a certain vision and mission, which stems from the founding spirit and is renewed every time a chapter is organised. The SVD Handbook for Superiors speaks of three aspects covered by the task of animation (D1, 119-121). Firstly, leaders need to animate the confreres to live according to the spirit of the Gospel. "The superior animates the confreres to be true to the spirit of the vows, to the vision of the Founder, and to the prophetic dimension of our missionary vocation" (2.2.1.). Secondly, the superior animates the members to live as religious and to live in community. "The task of the superior is ... to mobilize all the forces of the community by exhorting the confreres to co-responsibility, involving them in the common life and mission of the province or community, confronting them with new issues, fostering all legitimate initiatives from the grassroots, and appreciating each individual's charism" (2.2.2.). Thirdly, it is the task of the superiors to animate all the brothers to fulfil their mission responsibly. The Handbook reminds the superiors that the task handled by a confrere in a diocese must remain in line with the identity of the congregation (2.2.3.). Therefore, any task offered to a confrere by the diocese needs the blessing of the superior who guarantees that the task is still within the framework of the mission of the whole congregation.

To carry out the above tasks, the following three points need attention. Firstly, at the cognitive level, leaders are tasked with disseminating the shared vision so that it can become a defining part of members' insights. Members need to know where the congregation is heading. Second, members also need to be encouraged to remain committed to the shared vision. Third, members' skills need to be developed to effectively help achieve the congregation's vision. For this last purpose, leaders need to animate those in charge of basic and on-going formation to design and implement formation manuals that help members acquire these skills.

Animation that takes into account the three aspects above includes several elements. Firstly, the theological element. The theological foundations and insights upon which the congregation formulates its vision and mission need to be passed on to the members of the congregation. This includes the role of religious congregations in the life of the Church. Second, the spiritual element. The basic spirit which is expected to be the pillar that supports the realisation

of this vision needs to be conveyed. This basic spirit needs to be linked to the spirit of the founding generation of the congregation and contemporary needs. Third, the socio-political element. What is meant is an insight into the socio-political conditions under which the congregation in certain periods and contexts in history took a stand on prioritising certain areas. This insight is needed to emphasise the view that every religious institute in every context is called to respond specifically to the conditions of society and the people it serves. Fourth, the practical element, which concerns the basic practical skills that need to be possessed in order for the vision of the congregation to be realised.

Two things can be mentioned as goals of collective animation. The first is the improvement of the quality of the community life as religious missionaries. As a religious congregation, the SVD believes that the life in community of people from different national and cultural backgrounds is a living source of the unity of the diversity of the Church and the Kingdom of God (Prologue of the SVD Constitutions). This multicultural unity is important in a world characterised by various racial conflicts. Therefore, such a community must be “consciously created, intentionally promoted, carefully cared for and attentively nurtured.”¹³ That is, there must be an investment in forming and sustaining cross-cultural communities, which are indeed very important today. However, the experience of SVD members shows that living together cross-culturally is not always easy. As affirmed by the 17th General Chapter, conflicts and tensions often arise because of generational differences, because of racism, ethnocentrism, differences in character, and the tendency to stereotype (#30). Faced with these conditions, leaders need to animate all members to improve the quality of the community life. Serious efforts need to be made so that primordial and racial issues do not become the dominant consideration at the time of election of leaders (#35).

The second goal is the service rendered to the people. Leaders need to animate members to acquaint and fulfil the necessary requirements in order to optimally carry out the tasks assigned to them. The work done is a service to the people, but at the same time a source of livelihood for the members. Therefore, professionalism is a demand that must be fulfilled. And leaders need to support and encourage members to do their work according to the prescribed standards. In recent times, due to high profile cases of pedophilia and sexual offences, the provinces are asked to draw the standards of professional behaviour for members working in their areas.

¹³ Antonio M. Pernia, “The SVD in the Year 2012: Report of the Superior General to the XVII General Chapter,” in *SVD Mission 2012: Sharing Intercultural Life and Mission* (Roma: SVD Publications, 2012), 34–38.

Animation as described above can be referred to as collective animation. This animation is done in stages. The General Council animates provinces or regions, while leaders at the provincial or regional level animate communities. Community leaders carry out this task for their community members. In principle, this collective animation exercise is done equally for all. This means that if the animation is done by the General Council, then all provinces and regions receive the same attention. However, there are special situations that justify and require special animation. Provincial leaders are justified in giving special attention to one community when that community is facing problems. Differentiated treatment is a demand of fairness due to varying situations.

In addition to animation at the union level at various levels, members need personal animation, especially when a member faces problems with his life and work. Crises in life as a missionary, or lethargy in carrying out assigned tasks are experiences that members often face in their lives.

Coordination tasks

A leader in a religious union is the head of a family, not the head of a company. The members are not subordinates, but brothers and sisters. The members are not mere recipients of assignments that are initiated and decided upon. The members are the owners of the Society who have a vested interest in the continuity of the Society's work. Nevertheless, to ensure the effectiveness of the ministry, the leaders are in charge of coordinating the work of the members.

The essence of the coordination task is to recognise that the task being carried out by an individual or group of people is part of the overall mission of the congregation. Therefore, the implementation of a particular task should be part of the congregation's steps and strategies to carry out its mission and realise its vision. To perform coordination tasks well, proper planning, mentoring, and continuous evaluation are required. Everything must be based on compatibility with the congregation's vision. What is the reason that we initiate, sustain, and use union labour and finances for a work in a particular place? This awareness of being grounded in the congregation's vision is important for always linking work within a province or community. If a work no longer aligns with the congregation's vision, then there is no reason to maintain the work.

The performance of coordination tasks by leaders will help members to identify with a work carried out by other confreres. Being aware that a particular work is part of the union's move to realise its vision, the confreres will find it easier to give their support. They see it as part of their work too. With

this, it is also easier to convince people to become directly involved in the work when the need arises.

The task of coordination often faces two major difficulties. Firstly, in a region like Indonesia, often a work is started on the personal initiative of a missionary or confrere. This initiative is necessary because it is demanded by circumstances, often without any consultation with the leadership. Because of this, this kind of work is identified with a particular person. A particular school, workshop, or project is seen as the work of a particular person, whose future depends entirely on that person. Not infrequently, the congregation faces difficulties when the person concerned can no longer run the work. Claims of ownership where there are profits are easily made by others, while where there are liabilities and losses, the union is morally forced to put its back up.

The second difficulty is that when a person or group of people, because of experience or trust, has for a very long time taken on a certain task and feels that the task belongs to them. Here, it is not that others identify a particular work with a particular person, but that a particular person claims a particular work as his or her own. The field of the work becomes a field that is closed to others. Criticism of the work is taken as criticism of the manager.

To overcome these difficulties, what leaders need to do is to create space and make everyone aware of what they are doing. With this it becomes clear what belongs to the congregation ownership and for what the congregation is expected to get involved. The Handbook talks about the importance of delegation, communication and collaboration (D1, 3.0, 120). In carrying out the role of coordinator, a leader realises that he is not a single player who must guarantee the success of the performance, or Atlas who carries the entire weight of the union on his shoulders. He needs to seek help from confreres who have certain skills and talents and coordinate all that help. With good communication, a leader participates in the leadership of the whole congregation. He is not only concerned with the interests of his community or province, but the needs and direction of the whole union. Coordination includes collaboration with dioceses, other religious communities and the laity.

Administrative tasks

By administrative tasks, we mean the concrete management of leadership positions through office activities. Two things are important parts of administrative tasks. The first is communication. Leaders need to communicate to members and other parties a decision taken. The purpose of communication is so that all parties who need to know can get the information as soon as possible in a reliable form. Communication in a reliable form is necessary to prevent the emergence of various issues and gossip that are confusing. All

those involved in a decision-making process should be aware of the channels used to communicate the decision to the parties involved. Leaking a decision before official information from the leader is a sign of ineffective administrative roles.

The second thing is archiving. A good filing system makes it easy to trace references. This way, continuity in leadership is based not only on memory but on written references.

One important aspect of the administrative role of the leadership is the management of the property of the congregation. According to the provisions of the Catholic Church, religious orders are allowed to own property needed for the performance of their duties and to fulfil their needs. However, the management of such property must follow established norms, both civil and Church norms. Management includes the acquisition, use, and transfer of property. In relation to Church norms, the Canon law sets out the broad outlines of management. More detailed rules are outlined by each religious congregation. Usually, the norms of the congregation set limits on the authority of each level of leadership. A management plan that exceeds the limits of one level's authority must receive the blessing of the higher level. This restriction does not only concern the management of property acquired from the level above. For example, a community is not only obliged to seek approval for the use of finances obtained from provincial aid. All management of assets, including those obtained from the labour of community members, which goes beyond the authority of the community, must be approved in advance by the province. This is an application of the idea of monasticism, which emphasises the ideal of togetherness. Whatever is earned, whether by individuals or the community, belongs to the congregation.

SVD Indonesia in SVD Leadership

One of the dimensions of the history of the SVD Indonesia is the history of the involvement of the Indonesian SVDs in the leadership service of the congregation. As an international congregation, members should not make the origin of either region or country an issue in the selection of leaders. Choosing a leader based solely on tribal or national considerations is a denial of internationality which is the heritage, commitment, and mission of the SVD. However, even SVD members cannot withdraw or escape from the service of leadership in the association. This section will begin with the presentation of data on SVD members of Indonesian origin who were involved in leadership tasks until the end of the 1960s. This limit is taken because starting from the

1970s the SVD membership in Indonesia was dominated by SVD members of Indonesian origin. After that, data on the participation of SVDs from Indonesia in leadership services outside Indonesia will be presented.

Something Rare

In 1947, the Lesser Sunda Region, which was formed in 1913, was divided into two: the Timor Region and the Flores Region. Four years after the formation of the region, in 1951 the general board of the SVD appointed Fr. Adrianus Conterius (1913-1984)¹⁴ as admonitor of the Flores region.¹⁵ With this Fr. Conterius, who took perpetual vows and was ordained priest in 1943, was the first Indonesian in the leadership of the SVD. In the same year, Fr. Gabriel Manek (1913-1989) was appointed by Pope Pius XII to be the vicarius of Vicariate Larantuka.

In 1954 Fr. Lamber Lame Uran (1917-2004) who had just returned from the Netherlands was appointed to the Flores regional council.¹⁶ Three years later, Fr. Uran was entrusted as admonitor of the Flores Region. In the same year, 1957, Fr. Petrus Muda (1914-1990) was appointed rector of the Ende Brothers' community.¹⁷

The first Indonesian to become a regional representative was Fr. Donatus Djagom (1919-2011). In 1960, he was appointed to this position accompanying Fr. Bakker Antonius who was entrusted with the Flores regional office. One of the members of the regional council at that time was Fr. Paulus Sani Kleden (1924-1972). Fr. Djagom also served as rector of the Saint Michael Ende community, while Fr. Kleden was also rector of the Maumere district until his ordination as Bishop of the Vicariate of Bali in 1961. In the Bali-Lombok region (formed in 1951), Fr. Herman Embuiru (1919-2001) was entrusted with the role of regional admonitor.¹⁸

Due to the size of the region and the increasing number of members, in 1963, the Flores Region was divided into two, the Ende Region and the Ruteng Region. With this, during the leadership period 1963-1966, more and more Indonesians were entrusted to be involved in the governing board. Fr. Djagom became the vice regional accompanying Fr. Nicolaus Apoldoom

¹⁴ Together with Fr. Vicente Braganza from the Philippines, Fr. Adrianus Conterius was the first Asian to become a capitular in the SVD General Chapter, in 1958; Andrzej Miotk, "The SVD General Chapters from the Historical Point of View (Part II)," *Verbum SVD* 53, no. 2 (2012): 140).

¹⁵ *Nuntius Verbi Divini* 5/3/1951, 255-256.

¹⁶ *Nuntius Verbi Divini* 6/1/1954, 64.

¹⁷ *Nuntius Verbi Divini* 6/4/1957, 388

¹⁸ *Nuntius Verbi Divini* 7/2/1960, 239-240.

(1913-1996), who had become the superior of the Bali-Lombok Region a few years earlier, while Fr. Alex Beding (1924-2022) became a member of the Regional Council. Fr. Djagom continued to serve as rector of St. Michael community, while Fr. Beding was also rector of the John Berchmans Minor Seminary Todabelu, Mataloko. The rector of the Larantuka district was Fr. Michael Mige Raya (1928-2011). In the Bali-Lombok region, Fr. Embuiru continued his service as regional admonitor accompanying Fr. Blanken Bernardus as the regional. At that time, there was no division of districts in the Bali-Lombok Region. In Ruteng, Fr. Karolus Kale Bale (1913-1989), who was ordained priest with Fr. Manek in 1941, was entrusted with being a member of the regional council simultaneously as rector of the community of St Joseph Ruteng. Fr. Gregory Monteiro (1924-1997) was appointed rector of the Pius X Minor Seminary of Kisol. In Timor, Fr. Adrianus Conterius (1913-1984) was elected rector of the Kupang district.¹⁹

For the leadership period 1966-1969, Fr. Djagom was still entrusted as vice regional for the Ende region, accompanying Fr. Apeldoorn as regional, while simultaneously carrying out his duties as rector of the community of St. Michael, Ende. Fr. Beding also remains a member of the regional council and rector of John Berchmans Minor Seminary Todabelu, Mataloko. The rector of St Paul's Major Seminary Ledalero was Fr. Stephen Ozias Fernandez (1922-1995), who is recorded as the first rector of Ledalero of Indonesian nationality. Fr. Philipus Djuang (1929-2003), who had served for several years as master of the Brothers at Saint Conrardus community, was entrusted to become the rector of the community while serving at the same time as master novice of the Brothers. Fr. Petrus Muda was appointed rector of San Dominggo Hokeng Minor Seminary. Of the eight rectors in Ende Region, two were Indonesians, namely Fr. Migeraya in Larantuka and Fr. Marcus Malar (1914-1977) in Nagekeo.²⁰

In the Timor Region, it was only during the period 1966-1969 that Indonesians were appointed to leadership roles. Fr. Anton Pain Ratu (1929-2024) was entrusted with the role of regional admonitor to accompany Fr. Willibrordus Meulendijk (1921-1979) who became regional rector. Of the two regional rectors, one was an Indonesian, Fr. Adrian Conterius.²¹

In the Ruteng Region, there were no significant changes. Fr. Kale Bale remained member of the regional council and was no longer the rector of the regional house. Fr. Manteiro continued his duties as rector of Pius X Kisol Minor Seminary. The same situation happened in the Bali-Lombok region. Fr.

¹⁹ *Nuntius Verbi Divini* 7/5/1963, 610-611

²⁰ *Nuntius Verbi Divini* 8/3/1966, 534-535.

²¹ *Nuntius Verbi Divini* 8/3/1966, 534-535.

Embuiru was entrusted again to be the regional admonitor. Until then the Bali-Lombok regional council consisted of only three people, the regional, the vice-regional, and the admonitor.²²

Since 1969, the number of Indonesian SVDs who have been entrusted to participate in leadership services has become more and more. Gradually, the universal SVD also needed Indonesians in the implementation of leadership tasks for the whole congregation. Fr. Anton Pain Ratu was entrusted as the first Indonesian for such a task in 1979.²³ Until now, four Indonesians have been members of the general council of the SVD and one served as the Superior General of the Congregation.²⁴ Fr. Michael Mige Raya is the only Indonesian who has ever been the general procurator. He was elected in the general chapter in 1982.²⁵

In addition to the Superior General and his council, the members of the general leadership of the SVD are the general secretary and general procurator,²⁶ general treasurer,²⁷ secretaries,²⁸ and coordinators of the dimensions.²⁹ For this ministry, the Indonesian SVD have contributed three confreres, and both for the service as coordinators of the Scripture ministry, namely,

²² *Nuntius Verbi Divini* 8/3/1966, 534-535.

²³ P. Anton Pain Ratu was appointed to the general council in place of Fr. Alphonse Bilung from India who was elected in the chapter in 1977 but appointed bishop in 1979. Then Fr. Pain Ratu was also appointed bishop in 1982; Andrzej Miotk, "The SVD General Chapters from the Historical Point of View (Part II)," *Verbum SVD* 53, no. 2 (2012): 166.

²⁴ The tenth General Chapter in 1972 decided to change the number of generalate councils from five to seven (Miotk, "The SVD General Chapters from the Historical Point of View (Part II)," 158).

²⁵ In 1985, P. Mige Raya gave up this position (Miotk, "The SVD General Chapters from the Historical Point of View (Part II)," 176).

²⁶ The positions of general secretary and procurator general date back to the time of Arnold Janssen.

²⁷ The position of general economist began in 1947 in accordance with the decision of the seventh general chapter of that year (*ibid.*, p. 136).

²⁸ In 1932 the chapter decided that henceforth the mission procurator Steyl would be an *ex officio* member of the chapter. However, the congregation had more than one procurator of missions. Therefore, it was decided to appoint a mission secretary in charge of the whole union and based in Rome. The first mission secretary was Fr. Johannes Schuette, who began serving in 1955 and was elected Superior General in 1958; *Analecta SVD* 23 (1972): 62; see also Miotk, "The SVD General Chapters from the Historical Point of View (Part II)," 148.

²⁹ In 1967, the general leadership of the SVD established a department of social communication, which was first headed by Fr. Josef-Franz Eilers (*Nuntius SVD* 8/4/1967, 620). The first JPIC coordinator was elected in the general chapter in 1982 (See Miotk, "The SVD General Chapters from the Historical Point of View (Part II)," 174. The 13th general chapter in 1988 determined to make the apostolate of the Scriptures one-dimensional (See Miotk, "The SVD General Chapters From the Historical Point of View (Part III)," 316).

Fr. Guido Tisera from 2002 to 2008, and Fr. Lukas Jua from 2009 to 2013, and Fr. Kasmir Nema as the Coordinator of the Communications.

Leadership Abroad

In 1983, for the first time, the Indonesian SVD sent missionaries abroad. Two missionaries were sent to Papua New Guinea (PNG). Since then, every year a number of perpetually professed brothers and sisters have been posted abroad. With increasing numbers, Indonesian SVD members are also involved in leadership tasks outside Indonesia. In 1990, Fr. Yosef Tote Wae became the first Indonesian outside Indonesia to serve as the regional superior of the Madagascar region—a region pioneered by Indonesian SVDs. The first Indonesian to be entrusted with a role on a provincial council was Fr. Karolus Kelalu in 1999, in Brazil North (BRN), PANAM Zone. In the ASPAC Zone, in 1996, Fr. Goris Jehanus was appointed admonitor of the PNG province. The AFRAM Zone recorded its second Indonesian member in 1999, when Fr. Alex Dhae was entrusted as vice regional of Madagascar. Fr. Marianus Jehandut became the first Indonesian in the EUROPE Zone to serve as a member of the provincial council of the Dutch-Belgium province in 2007.

On 1 May 2013, the new provincials and councils in the provinces and regions of the Eurozone started their work. Data obtained after 1 May show the participation of Indonesian SVD members in leadership services at the provincial/regional level outside Indonesia and Timor Leste as follows:³⁰

Zone	Provincial	Vice Provincial	Member of Provincial Council
AFRAM	—	1	4
ASPAC	1	3	6
EUROPE	—	2	5
PANAM	—	6	2
Total	1	12	17

This data shows that 27 out of 402 Indonesian SVD³¹ missionaries working outside Indonesia have been entrusted with leadership tasks. For

³⁰ Data based on PDF version of SVD Catalog, May 2013, <http://www.svdcuria.org/>.
³¹ As of June 24, 2013, the number of Indonesian SVDs who have made perpetual vows is 1,035, of whom 632 are working in Indonesia and 27 in Timor Leste.

comparison we can take two other groups which together with Indonesia are the largest nationalities in the SVD, namely, India and Poland.

Indian SVD participation in union leadership tasks at the provincial/regional level outside India:³²

Zone	Provincial	Vice Provincial	Member of Provincial Council
AFRAM	3	—	2
ASPAC	—	—	1
EUROPE	—	—	3
PANAM	6	2	5
Total	9	3	10

Of the 225 Indian SVDs serving outside India,³³ 23 are now entrusted to be involved in leadership at the provincial/regional level.

Participation of Polish SVDs in union leadership tasks at the provincial/regional level outside Poland and the Ural region:³⁴

Zone	Provincial	Vice Provincial	Member of Provincial Council
AFRAM	—	2	4
ASPAC	—	1	1
EUROPE	1	—	2
PANAM	—	2	5
Total	1	5	12

The Polish SVD experienced a marked decrease in the number of confreres serving outside Poland and the Urals. Of the current 292,³⁵ 19 are entrusted to participate in leadership at the provincial/regional/mission level.

³² Data based on PDF version of SVD Catalog, May 2013, <http://www.svdcuria.org/>.

³³ The number of SVD confreres who were born in India and have taken perpetual vows is 757, of whom 532 work in India.

³⁴ Data based on PDF version of SVD Catalog, May 2013, <http://www.svdcuria.org/>.

³⁵ As of June 24, 2013, the number of Polish-born and perpetually professed SVDs is 501, of whom 193 work in Poland and 16 in the Ural region.

The above data shows that 14 (9 outside India plus 5 provincial and regional leaders in India) out of 54 provincials/regions in the SVD are brothers of Indian origin. That means 25.92 percent. The most are in PANAM. Six out of 16 provincials/regions in PANAM are SVD members of Indian origin. Almost the same number of Indonesian confreres filled the role of vice-provincial, both overall for the SVD and for PANAM. Another interesting fact is that the Indonesian members were entrusted with leadership duties equally in all four zones, between seven and eight in each zone. Confreres from India are concentrated in PANAM and AFRAM, as are confreres from Poland.

Eleven years later, in 2024, the situation has changed. The total number of the SVD per January 2024 is 5.754. 1683 of them are of Indonesian nationality. The report to the 19th General Chapter shows the following figures of Indonesian in the leadership service in the provinces/regions outside Indonesia.³⁶

Zone	Provincial	Vice Provincial	Member of Provincial Council
AFRAM	1	1	5
ASPAC	—	1	7
EUROPE	1	2	3
PANAM	6	3	3
Total	8	7	18

In the same date, the Indian SVDs are: 974, in which 299 are living and working outside India.

Zone	Provincial	Vice Provincial	Member of Provincial Council
AFRAM	1	3	4
ASPAC	3	2	3
EUROPE	3	—	8
PANAM	1	2	7
Total	8	7	22

³⁶ According to the report of the Superior General, 510 Indonesian confreres are outside Indonesia.

The polish SVDs per January 2024 are 403, or 7 percent of the total number of the SVDs. 221 polish confreres serving the Society outside their home country.

Zone	Provincial	Vice Provincial	Member of Provincial Council
AFRAM	2	1	2
ASPAC	1	1	1
EUROPE	—	2	1
PANAM	1	4	5
Total	4	8	9

Closing Remark

Leadership in a religious union is not something to be pursued. Nevertheless, it is a form of ministry like all other ministries. Therefore, one of the aspects that needs to be considered in the formation of prospective missionary religious is the aspect of leadership. For, as stated in the introduction to this paper, leadership is one of the five important aspects of life as a missionary religious.

SVD Founding Generation, Anthropos Tradition, and Interculturality¹

Roger Schroeder, SVD

The 2008 SSpS and 2012 SVD General Chapters focused on the theme of interculturality for the Arnoldus Family,² but this vision and goal is not new for those congregations. This article will trace this history and development for the SVD only, on the occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the SVD. After providing an initial definition of interculturality, we will begin with an exploration of the roles of three key persons of the SVD Founding Generation in the development of what we today refer to as the “Anthropos Tradition”, which will be explained later. It was articulated by Wilhelm Schmidt, supported by Arnold Janssen, and lived out by Josef Freinademetz. Much of this material is drawn from the work of SVD archivist Jürgen Ommerborn. Secondly, we will trace the reorganization of Anthropos Institute into Anthropos Institute International and the development of the vision of the Anthropos Tradition. The third section will examine the link between the Anthropos Tradition and interculturality up to the present day.³

¹ This chapter was published in *Verbum SVD* 64, no. 3-4 (2023), 298-317. It was drawn from a PowerPoint lecture by Roger Schroeder, presented originally for 1) an SSpS-SVD Interculturality two-week program held at the Arnold Janssen Spirituality Center, Quezon City, the Philippines, on June 19, 2023; and 2) the SVD community of Marsfield, Australia, June 28, 2023. For another treatment of this topic, see: “Anthropos Institute International and Interculturality,” in *Giants’ Footprints: 90th Anniversary of Anthropos Institute (1931-2021)*, Collectanea Instituti Anthropos 53, Stanisław Grodz, S.M. Michael, and Roger Schroeder, eds. (Baden-Baden, Germany: Academia Verlag, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2021), 197-206.

² Arnold Janssen founded the Society of the Divine Word (SVD), and along with Mother Maria Helena Stollenwerk and Mother Josepha Hendrina Stenmanns, the Mission Congregation of the Servants of the Holy Spirit (SSpS) and the Servants of the Holy Spirit of Perpetual Adoration (SSpSAP), respectively.

³ See S.M. Michael SVD, “Interculturality and the Anthropos Tradition,” *Verbum SVD* 54, no. 1 (2013), 60-74.

Before jumping into the main topic, we need to briefly describe the term “interculturality.” It originally was used by social scientists to make the radical proposal of developing mutual relationships of respect among those of different worldviews, backgrounds, and historical experience in the face of ethnocentrism, colonialism, and globalization. Recently the goal of interculturality has been embraced and developed by Christian scholars/ theologians/ missiologists, male and female Catholic religious congregations, and many others. As for further clarification, the terms of “internationality” and “multiculturality” signify the mere physical presence of different nationalities and cultures in the same space, such as in an airport, neighborhood, religious community, or parish. Individuals/groups in those contexts hope for mere toleration of difference. The term of “crossing cultures” describes the one-way movement of attempting to understand and enter another culture through language and culture learning and developing some level of cultural sensitivity.⁴ Anthropologists, missionaries, ministers, and many immigrants strive for this. Adaptation and accommodation are the goals of this process. However, interculturality represents a further intentional shift to form mutually enriching and challenging relationships and encounters among those who are “other” than oneself—whether that is in terms of nationality, ethnicity/“race”, generation, gender, social/economic status, urban/rural contexts, and particular individual/communal circumstances. An in-depth two-way encounter and spirit of mutuality are essential elements of interculturality.⁵

We will now begin engaging the central topic of this article, by describing the three SVD members of the founding generation regarding what we call today the “Anthropos Tradition.”

⁴ For further descriptions of “cross-cultural” and “multicultural”, see Anthony J. Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally: Faith, Culture, and the Renewal of Praxis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 17-21.

⁵ For a rich treatment of the many elements of interculturality for the life and ministry of religious congregations, see the following, which were edited by Lazar Stanislaus, SVD, and Martin Ueffing, SVD: Vol. I: *Intercultural Living* and Vol. II *Intercultural Mission* (Sankt Augustin, Germany: Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, and New Dehli: ISPCK, 2015); *Interculturalidad: en la vida y la misión* (Estella, Spain: Editorial Verbo Divino, 2017); *Intercultural Living: Explorations in Missiology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018). Also see: Maria Cimperman, RSCJ, and Roger Schroeder, SVD, eds. *Engaging Diversity: Interculturality and Consecrated Life Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020; Lazar T. Stanislaus, SVD, and Christian Tauchner, SVD, eds. *Becoming Intercultural: Perspectives on Mission* (Sankt Augustin, Germany: Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, and New Dehli: ISPCK, 2021); Roger Schroeder and Maria Cimperman, eds. *Comprometernos con la diversidad: Interculturalidad y vida consagrada hoy* (Estella, Spain: Editorial Verbo Divino, 2022).

SVD Founding Generation of the “Anthropos Tradition”

Wilhelm Schmidt, SVD

Schmidt,⁶ who took first vows as an SVD in 1883, was an anthropologist and linguist. He fought against the idea of evolutionism—that religion developed from the “lowest” level like animism to a belief in one God. He strove to show that the most ancient peoples had a clearer idea about a high god than most people thought. He developed a cultural circle theory. Schmidt got several SVD missionaries to gather ethnographic data from various places of mission. He started the *Anthropos* journal in 1906 to bring the cultural and linguistic material by SVD and others into the academic field, and he established the Anthropos Institute in 1931 to provide a support structure for this initiative. Though the cultural circle theory was abandoned eventually, people today recognize that most traditional societies have a clear idea of an overarching spiritual being or power beyond themselves.

Beyond the academic interests, Schmidt did not envision that this scientific study would provide quick “recipes” and answers for missionaries, but rather it would help them in their theological/cultural reflection and the particular contexts of their apostolic work. Anthropology became part of SVD formation and training. More importantly, these efforts to study culture and acknowledge, to some degree, the deeper religious aspirations of non-Western people shaped the charism and tradition of the SVD, and I would add, the SSpS.

Schmidt’s initiatives also had some impact on general Catholic mission practice and theory. Schmidt established a Mission Exhibition in Rome which developed into the ethnological mission museum for the Vatican in 1927. It is interesting to note that Pope Pius XI and Schmidt, who met often, “tended to agree on many things, especially regarding the museum, so that it became difficult to know which suggestions came from Schmidt and which from the Pope.”⁷ In his 1926 encyclical *Rerum Ecclesiae* (“Fostering Missionary Zeal”), the pope insistently called for developing local clergy and hierarchy, and he hoped that the Mission Exhibition and eventual museum “would interest people in missions, foster vocations, and be good for religion in general.”⁸ In this way, the SVD contributed to opening the door for a new understanding of culture and mission for the Church, many years before the Second Vatican Council.

⁶ For an excellent biography of Schmidt, see: Ernest Brandewie, *When Giants Walked the Earth: The Life and Times of Wilhelm Schmidt, SVD*, Studia Instituti Anthropos 44 (Fribourg, Switzerland: University of Fribourg, 1990).

⁷ Brandewie, *When Giants Walked the Earth*, 186.

⁸ Brandewie, 186.

Arnold Janssen, SVD

Due to the anti-church context of the Kulturkampf in Germany, Arnold Janssen crossed over into the Netherlands to found the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) in Steyl in 1875. The congregation immediately became international as Germans, Austrians, and Dutch joined the early foundation. Along with his passion for missionary work, “Arnold Janssen was very interested in the pursuit of science and endorsed Schmidt’s efforts and got the Society involved both in terms of personnel and finances.... Through this decision the Founder made sure that the work of Schmidt would continue and would become part of the SVD identity.”⁹

Janssen acknowledged the dangers of extreme nationalism, or what we would call negative ethnocentrism today, within the religious community itself, as shown in his 1898 letter regarding the early foundations of the SVD in the United States.

I am naturally averse to any extreme nationalism, but it does seem to me that it must be a challenge for us to foster our German nature, not exclusively, but sufficiently to ensure that it will be preserved from the danger of decline, and yet at the same time, where possible, to choose such forms as to prevent other nationalities from feeling themselves rejected.¹⁰

Today, we could refer to this as inclusive rather than exclusive nationality identities, that is an affirmation of the dignity of one’s own nationality and culture, without diminishing or negating that of the other.

Secondly, Janssen advised missionaries to also show such cultural sensitivity among the local people they served. He encouraged the SVD to be persons of prudence in that they must never offend people in their national sensitivities since experience shows that people are vulnerable in this point.¹¹ He also insisted that the missionary must learn the local language very well. For example, Janssen wrote the following to Fr. Tollinger, the SVD Superior in the new mission in Brazil.

⁹ Ennio Mantovani, SVD, “The Anthropos Institute in the SVD after 2000.” *Verbum SVD* 41, 4 (2000), 597.

¹⁰ Arnold Janssen, SVD, *Letters to the United States of America*, Jos. Alt, ed., transl. Robert Pung and Peter Spring, Steyler Verlag Nettetal, 1998, p. 43, footnote 3.

¹¹ Jürgen Ommerborn, “Founding Generation: Final revised longer text,” unpublished paper (2017), 3. This was background material for the presentation on “Founding Generations on Interculturality” by Ommerborn on January 24, 2017, during the three-week SVD-SSpS program on “Interculturality and Initial Formation” in Nemi.

Since the Brazilians are so sensitive regarding the correct pronunciation, the holy love of God demands that you strive for a perfect Brazilian pronunciation in order to be able to do all the more for the salvation of souls. I demand that as well and I will hold you accountable if you don't do what is necessary in that regard.¹²

Thirdly, in terms of missionary methodology, Janssen wrote the following to the Apostolic Pro-Prefect in Togo, when he heard that Fr. Dier, SVD, had removed a “fetish”.

To be sure, St. Boniface had the Donar Oak near Goslar cut down and his success proved that in the circumstances he could take such a liberty. But as a rule, missionaries may not do such things.... idol worshippers have their own will which should not be taken from them, because God himself leaves it to them and does not wish to convert them by force.¹³

On the one hand, Janssen's references to “salvation of souls” and “idol worshippers” need to be situated within the context of the theology of mission of his day. However more importantly, at the same time Janssen demonstrated a more positive attitude toward culture than was commonplace during his time, through his support of Schmidt's anthropological endeavors, his insistence on cultural sensitivity among the missionaries and the people being served, his policy for language learning, and his respect for the human dignity and freedom of conscience of the local people. I propose that these factors serve as the roots for the SVD charism of the Anthropos Tradition and the foundations for what will develop later into a call to interculturality. “Thus, the SVD anthropological tradition from its very beginning stressed the reality of cultural pluralism, and the need to understand cultures for an effective Christian mission.”¹⁴

Josef Freinademetz, SVD

While Schmidt and Janssen provided the academic and programmatic framework for the positive attitude toward culture, Josef Freinademetz was the one who put this vision into practice in a radical way. Using the definitions introduced in the opening paragraphs of this article, Freinademetz moved

¹² Letter of Janssen to Tollinger, St. Wendel's, January 10, 1900, 57.964 in: Joseph Alt, *Journey in Faith: The Missionary Life of Arnold Janssen*, transl. Fran Mansfield SVD and Jacqueline Mulberge, SSPS, Analecta SVD 85 (Rome: Apud Collegium Verbi Divini, 2002), 576.

¹³ Alt, *Journey in Faith: The Missionary Life of Arnold Janssen*, 2002, 641.

¹⁴ Michael, “Interculturality and the Anthropos Tradition,” 68.

through a process from the multicultural and cross-cultural approaches and perspectives to what we call interculturality today.

He arrived in Hong Kong on April 20, 1879, less than four years after the SVD foundation. He arrived in a tense colonialism context in which the memory of two Opium Wars in 1839-42 and 1856-60 was still fresh. Most Chinese had a very negative attitude toward Europeans. Freinademetz was a “child of his time” in terms of the contemporary mission theology and European paternalism as reflected in the following quote.

The native Religion of the Chinese was for him, as for most if not all other missionaries, simply devil worship. He made fun of the sacrifices being offered: pigs were slaughtered, but the images of the gods had to be content only with the smell of the offerings, because the Chinese ate the meat themselves. The missionary now has the duty to wage war against the devil, to snatch souls from the devil’s grasp, to destroy the devil’s images as well as his temples....¹⁵

While these were the thoughts of Freinademetz during the first stage of his mission work in China, he also had come to realize that adapting to Chinese clothes and eating was not sufficient.

The main thing still remains to be done: the transformation of the inner man, the study of the Chinese world view, of Chinese customs and practices, of the Chinese character and Chinese psychology. That is not the work of a day, nor even of a year; neither does it take place without many a painful operation.¹⁶

This transformation is exactly what happened in the second part of his missionary life when he moved north in the Chinese mainland in South Shantung.

To get to know the people, he stayed with each family for one or two days throughout the region assigned to him. As a result, there was a tremendous change in his attitude towards the Chinese.

Sometimes I observe full of amazement poor people with what kind of indescribable sacrifices and labors they collect for themselves the necessary things for making a fire.

¹⁵ Jürgen Ommerborn, “Fr. Josef Freinademetz’s Journey towards Interculturality,” unpublished paper (2020), 6. This was background material for the presentation on “Founding Generations and Interculturality” by Ommerborn on January 29, 2020, during the three-week SVD-SSpS program on “Spirituality and Interculturality” in Steyl.

¹⁶ Quoted in: Fritz Bornemann, *As Wine Poured Out: Blessed Joseph Freinademetz SVD: Missionary in China 1879-1908*, transl. John Vogelgesang, SVD (Rome: Divine Word Missionaries, 1984), 56-57.

I stayed with the family of catechumens. In order to prepare the meal for me, they even burned the lid of the cooking kettle because there was nothing else.

I am often astonished about the education/knowledge of even the simplest farmers. A number of them know the history of their country from 3000 years ago; even the simple man often quotes passages from Confucius, the holy man as he is always called. Actually, everybody is using all the time a number of meaningful proverbs. All in all, the Chinese have good heads on their shoulders. They are unusually gifted. Even a simple farmer speaks like a doctor [professor]. They have mastered a whole series of social forms. In many worldly matters they are far ahead of Europeans.¹⁷

In these words of Freinademetz, we see signs of the growing mutual relationship with Chinese families and a decline in his European superiority complex—indications of the movement toward interculturality. Ommerborn describes the further depth of this transformation:

Over the years Fr. Freinademetz changed almost completely in his attitude towards the Chinese. As we have seen, in his first two years he had hardly a good word to say about the Chinese. But as time went on, he had learned and mastered the language and gotten to know the people on a deep level, he truly fell in love with the Chinese – so much so that he said, that even in heaven he wanted to be a Chinese.¹⁸

A well-known phrase of Freinademetz is: “Love is the only foreign language which people understand.” The last testament of his love for the Chinese occurred on January 15, 1907, when he made a pastoral visit to children suffering from a typhoid epidemic. Perhaps it was the day on which he caught the disease himself.¹⁹ He died on January 28, 1908.

Freinademetz is a fine example of one who moved from contempt to toleration to appreciation of cultural differences, “as much as it was possible for him against the background of the Catholic theology and the political situation of those days.”²⁰ Ommerborn made a further insightful observation that perhaps we should consider this extended encounter as both “Fr. Freinademetz’s and the Chinese people’s journey towards interculturality- from mutual misunderstanding (contempt) to mutual love, a journey of conversion. . . .”²¹

¹⁷ Quoted in Ommerborn 2020, 8.

¹⁸ Ommerborn 2020, 9.

¹⁹ Ommerborn 2017, 13.

²⁰ Ommerborn 2017, 4.

²¹ Ommerborn 2017, 15.

Having looked at the three key SVD figures of the founding generation in terms of the “Anthropos Tradition,” we now will briefly outline the development of the Anthropos Institute in terms of this tradition and the SVD charism.

Anthropos Institute and the “Anthropos Tradition”

Anthropos Institute

The first primary SVD collaborators of Schmidt in Sankt Gabriel in Mödling near Vienna included Wilhelm Koppers, Martin Gusinde, Paul Schebesta, Michael Schulien, Damien Kreichgauer, and Ferdinand Hestermann.²² They contributed to the *Anthropos* journal, which began in 1906, and some of them did extensive field work. They contributed in various ways to founding Anthropos Institute (AI) in 1931 in Sankt Gabriel, near Vienna. The Institute moved near Fribourg, Switzerland, in 1938 due to the intrusion of the Nazi German Third Reich. In the early 1960s, the Institute moved to Sankt Augustin, near Bonn. Stanisław Grodź has written an excellent article on the history of the Institute, its relationship with the SVD, the SVD staff and lay collaborators, and the relevance of the Institute for the SVD.²³

The *Anthropos* journal has contributed much to the academic world.²⁴ A renowned ethnologist Robt. Heine-Geldern stated the following in 1950. “Back since the Middle Ages missionaries have enriched our understanding of other languages and cultures. But never before has a mission-sending society dedi-cated itself so systematically to practical as well as theoretical research in these areas as has the Society of the Divine Word.”²⁵ However, on the other hand, it was observed that, “Schmidt’s idea of creating a journal ‘for

²² See the very fine chapter of Joachim G. Piepke, “The Significant Collaborators of Wilhelm Schmidt (before 1931),” in *Giants’ Footprints: 90th Anniversary of Anthropos Institute (1931-2021)*, Collectanea Instituti Anthropos 53, Stanisław Grodź, Sebastian M. Michael, and Roger Schroeder, eds. (Germany: Academia Verlag, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2021), 39-79.

²³ Stanisław Grodź, “Anthropos Institute – An Institute in the Background,” in *Giants’ Footprints: 90th Anniversary of Anthropos Institute (1931-2021)*, Collectanea Instituti Anthropos 53, Stanisław Grodź, Sebastian M. Michael, and Roger Schroeder, eds. (Baden-Baden, Germany: Academia Verlag, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2021), 17-37.

²⁴ For a detailed description of the historical development of the journal, see Darius J. Piwowarczyk, “*Anthropos* – A Journal that Introduced a Missionary Order into the Curious World of Academia,” in *Giants’ Footprints: 90th Anniversary of Anthropos Institute (1931-2021)*, Collectanea Instituti Anthropos 53, Stanisław Grodź, Sebastian M. Michael, and Roger Schroeder, eds. (Baden-Baden, Germany: Academia Verlag, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2021), 81-117.

²⁵ Quoted in Fritz Bornemann, *P. Wilhelm Schmidt S.V.D. 1868-1954* (Rome: Apud Collegium Verbi Divini, 1982), 343.

missionaries and with the collaboration of missionaries' had been directly applied only in the early years of the journal's existence."²⁶ A number of efforts were made to address the question of the relevance of the journal and the institute to the SVD.

The SVD Generalate under the leadership of Superior General Heinrich Heekeren convoked an international consultation of AI members and others, which met in Pune, India, from December 29, 1986 through January 4, 1987.

The participants of the Pune consultation indicated, that the problem of the clear purpose and direction of the AI after the death of the first generation of the SVD anthropologists was linked with the fact that in the mid-1980s the AI was neither productive in training new SVD anthropologists, nor was it a coordinating body of the SVD anthropological initiatives, nor a centre of distribution of anthropological information within the SVD.²⁷

The proceedings were published²⁸ and a number of suggestions by the thirty participants that were carried out in the next few years included starting in 1988 the publications of *Interlink*, a public report of the activities of AI members and affiliated institutes, and the bulletin "Anthropology and Mission," with suggested articles and books for missionaries.

At the request of the SVD Generalate, a questionnaire-consultation was conducted with the AI members in 1997-1998 and a seven-person *ad hoc* committee met in Sankt Augustin in April 2001. As a result, SVD Superior General Antonio Pernia implemented a new model or structure for Anthropos Institute, which would become known as Anthropos Institute International (AII).²⁹ Ennio Mantovani was appointed as the first "Coordinator of Anthropos International," which "was intended as a network of members active in various locations without a geographically defined centre, managed by a coordinator, who would inspire the members to take part in common projects."³⁰ The office in Sankt Augustin, with its own director, became the "publishing house" (or Anthropos Institute Sankt Augustin) with the huge library and archives. Two Generalate-appointed AI members, after a

²⁶ Grodź, "Anthropos Institute," 32.

²⁷ Grodź, "Anthropos Institute," 33. See Wayne Robbins, Peter Knecht, and Roger Schroeder, "Report and Recommendations," in Joachim G. Piepke, ed. *Anthropology and Mission SVD International Consultation on Anthropology for Mission*, Studia Instituti Missiologici SVD 41 (Nettel: Steyler Verlag: Wort und Werk, 1988), 9-20.

²⁸ Piepke, *Anthropology and Mission*, 1988.

²⁹ For a fuller description of the various consultations and overall process leading up to the AI reorganization, see Antonio Pernia, "Expectations of the Generalate of the Anthropos Institute," *Verbum SVD* 45, 1 (2004), 20-29.

³⁰ Grodź, "Anthropos Institute," 25.

consultative vote with the AI members, joined the coordinator to form an AI Council in 2003.

Anthropos Tradition and Anthropos Institute International

In the process of clarifying the expectations of the SVD Generalate for the Anthropos Institute under this new structure, Pernia began by coining the term “Anthropos Tradition” and defined it in this way.

[T]his Anthropos tradition....is the heritage that we have received from those most identified with the charism of our Society—Arnold Janssen, Joseph Freinademetz and Wilhelm Schmidt—a heritage articulated by Schmidt, but originating from Janssen himself and exemplified in the life of Freinademetz. That is, the attitude of openness to and respect for the cultures of other people in the conviction that true evangelization entails not the brute imposition of the gospel message but its rediscovery from within the cultures of the peoples. Our Anthropos tradition is really a way of doing mission which considers an appreciation of people’s cultures as a necessary precondition for genuine evangelization.... whereby the gospel message is not simply parachuted from outside, but enters into dialogue with the culture of the people.... whereby the missionary is ready not just to change people but to be changed himself, or as EN [*Evangelii Nuntiandi*] (e.g. no. 15) puts it...whereby the evangelizer not only evangelizes but allows himself or herself to be evangelized.³¹

The Generalate spelled out what they expected of the reorganized Anthropos Institute.³² First of all, they wanted the publication of the very fine *Anthropos* journal to continue as long as possible, and that AI would become an international network of members collaborating with each other and that it would impact the entire Society of the Divine Word. Secondly, they wanted AI to contribute anthropology for mission in the areas of research and initial and on-going formation for the SVD. Thirdly, the Generalate wanted AI to „act as the guardian of the Anthropos tradition of the Society.... not only in the sense of preserving it but also in the sense of promoting and developing it.... and seeing to it that it is properly passed on from one generation to the next.”³³ Pernia further stressed that the Anthropos Tradition, which was characteristic of Janssen, Freinademetz, and Schmidt, had been bequeathed to the SVD. “AI is the bearer and keeper of this tradition. Without this tradition, something essential would be lost from our Society.”³⁴

³¹ Pernia, “Expectations of the Generalate,” 34.

³² See Pernia, 29-36.

³³ Pernia, 34.

³⁴ Pernia, 35.

Network among AII members

One central focus under the new structure of what is now called, Anthropos Institute International (AII), has been to develop the network of collaboration among the members and the affiliated institutes. In terms of the former, the *Interlink* report has grown much bigger and continued to be published annually as a means of communication among AII members and the SVD Society; a list server was established for some years as a means of exchanging ideas among AI members; nine AI members joined others in publishing chapters in a ASPAMIR (Asia and Pacific Missionary Research) publication of *Mission and Violence*,³⁵ groups of AI members attending interculturality workshops met in Nemi in January 2015 and 2016. More recently, fifteen AII members contributed to a major publication of *Giants' Footprints: 90th Anniversary of Anthropos Institute (1931-2021)*,³⁶ which also contains a valuable historical data file of past and present AI members in an Appendix. Another initiative is that international ZOOM consultations/discussions among AII members have been held in October 2021, March 2022 (with a follow-up questionnaire), and July 2023. The 2021 and 2022 Zoom consultations and the questionnaire represent the first time for such an engaging conversation by so many AII members. The significant collaboration of the AII members around the work of interculturality will be discussed under the section below.

Beyond these collaborative efforts, the impressive activities and professional accomplishments of individual members is reflected in the annual *Interlink*.³⁷ Following Schmidt, AII members also contribute to the broader church. As just two examples, Louis J. Luzbetak and Sebastian M. Michael have served on the staff of or as a consultant for the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Culture. Numerically, the number of AI members never exceeded thirty until the late 1980s, and now as of September 2023, there are forty-six members [40 full members, two emeriti, and four associate (non-SVD) members]. The first SSpS was admitted as a full member in 2015, and two of the associate members are Hindu scholars who work with AII members in India.

³⁵ Patrick R. Gesch, SVD, ed. *Mission and Violence: Healing the Lasting Damage* (Madang, PNG:DWU Press, 2009)

³⁶ Stanisław Grodz, S.M. Michael, and Roger Schroeder, eds. *Giants' Footprints: 90th Anniversary of Anthropos Institute (1931-2021)*, Collectanea Instituti Anthropos 53, (Baden-Baden, Germany: Academia Verlag, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2021).

³⁷ Also see the chapters of current projects by eight AII members in Section 3: "Current Projects, Methodologies, and Perspectives," in *ibid.*, 197-305.

Network among Institutes

In terms of institutions, in addition to Anthropos Institute Sankt Augustin, other AII-affiliated centers were established before 1980 in Brazil, Congo, Ghana, India, Japan, and Papua New Guinea.³⁸ While the center in Congo is currently not open, the original centers in the other five countries are still functioning, and three more centers in India and one in Indonesia have more recently increased the total number of these institutes, with some affiliation with AII, to nine. AII members are directors of six of the centers and SVD direct and/or work in the other three, of which two (Ghana and Japan) of the three were established by AII members. Institutional collaboration has been most evident among the four cultural centers in India (Mumbai, Guwahati, Hyderabad, and Sundargarh). Annual reports of most of these affiliated institutes are posted in the annual *Interlink* for the sake of encouraging collaboration and providing communication among the institutes, AII members, and the wider SVD.

The second major focus of the reorganization into Anthropos Institute International is strengthening the relationship with the wider Society of the Divine Word. This will be treated in the next section.

“Anthropos Tradition” and Interculturality

Interculturality and the SVD

The opportunity for AII to make a very significant contribution to the life and mission of the SVD occurred when the chosen theme of the 2012 General Chapter was on interculturality— “From Every Nation, People, and Language: Sharing Intercultural Life and Mission.” Although it was not an intentional choice to appoint AII members to the preparatory commission, it is not surprising that five of the ten persons on the commission belonged to the AII, in consideration of the topic.³⁹ The preparatory commission met in December 2010 and January 2012. Roger Schroeder, who succeeded Mantovani as the International Coordinator of Anthropos Institute in 2007, circulated an AII letter requesting feedback on the theme and pre-Chapter material

³⁸ For a report on each of these developments, except for Congo, see Section 2: “Local Outreach from the Past to the Present” in *Giants’ Footprints: 90th Anniversary of Anthropos Institute (1931-2021)*, Collectanea Instituti Anthropos 53, Stanisław Grodz, Sebastian M. Michael, and Roger Schroeder, eds. (Baden-Baden, Germany: Academia Verlag, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2021), 141-193.

³⁹ AII members of the preparatory commission were Pio Estepa, M.T. Joseph, Robert Kisala, Darius Piwowarczyk, and Roger Schroeder.

before each of the meetings of the pre-Chapter commission. These reports were collated and edited by the AII Council and submitted to the Generalate. Input was provided by a dozen AII members for the first meeting of the commission and fourteen for the second. The latter included extensive responses and “position papers.”

The SVD 17th General Chapter of 2012 stated: “Interculturality is a distinguishing feature and an essential part of our identity.... As SVD missionaries, we take St. Joseph Freinademetz as a model and example of our intercultural life and mission....”⁴⁰ In terms of the intercultural *ad extra* dimension of mission, which “is a way of giving witness to the unity and diversity of the Kingdom of God,”⁴¹ the Chapter identified the following areas: primary and new evangelization, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, promotion of the culture of life, family and youth, education and research, indigenous and ethnic communities, migration, reconciliation and peace building, social justice and poverty eradication, and care of creation.⁴² At the same time, the Chapter highlighted the following areas of the *ad intra* intercultural aspects of religious life: spirituality, community, leadership, finance, and formation.⁴³ In other words, interculturality should impact every aspect of SVD mission and life. Furthermore, this enhances in practice the SVD charism as stated in the *Constitutions*: “As a community of brothers from different nations and languages, we become a living symbol of the unity and diversity of the Church” (cf. Prologue).

In August 2012, a month after the Chapter, a number of SVD who were attending an international conference in Toronto spent an extra day discussing the final Chapter documents. As a result, the AII Council sent a proposal to the General Council to provide support in implementing the “Congregational Directions” of the 2012 Chapter. Superior General Heinz Kulüke and his Council accepted this proposal whereby the AII Council would serve as an intercultural resource committee. An initial *ad hoc* group that was formed included five AII members, one missiologist,⁴⁴ and AII member vice-Superior General Robert Kisala as the liaison with the General Council. In addition, four AII members and two SVD non-AII members published articles on interculturality in *Verbum SVD* vol. 54, no. 1, 2013.

⁴⁰ Documents of the 17th General Chapter SVD 2012, *In Dialogue with the Word* no. 11 (September 2012), par. 26.

⁴¹ *In Dialogue with the Word* no. 11, par. 5.

⁴² *In Dialogue with the Word* no. 11, par. 5-25.

⁴³ *In Dialogue with the Word* no. 11, par. 26-45.

⁴⁴ *Ad hoc* group consisted of AII members Philip Gibbs, Jon Kirby, S.M. Michael, Alexander Rödlach, and Roger Schroeder, and missiologist Victor Zacharias, who had attended the Toronto meeting.

Resource Committee of Interculturality

Over the next few years, the *ad hoc* committee assessed social science tools for interculturality and gathered other resources. Schroeder led a two-day intercultural workshop for members of the Arnold Janssen Spirituality Centre (AJSC) in July 2014 to foster a link between interculturality and spirituality. A two-week workshop was held in Nemi in January 2015 to prepare resource persons for developing and improving programs of intercultural competence. The participants included twenty-eight SVD, of whom ten were AII members, one was a member of the AJSC team, and five SSpS. All the members of the SVD General Council and the SSpS CLT (Congregational Leadership Team) were present at various points of the workshop. Four more persons were added to the *ad hoc* committee in 2015 to provide further geographical and SSpS representation,⁴⁵ and the group was renamed the Resource Committee for Interculturality (RCI) to reflect its ongoing work beyond *ad hoc* status. A second workshop for deepening the preparation of these resource persons was held in Nemi in January 2016. In the spirit of true collaboration, the SVD and SSpS co-sponsored a joint three-week bilingual (English and Spanish) workshop on “Interculturality and Initial Formation” in January-February 2017 with an equal number of SVD and SSpS participants. The participants of these three workshops were asked to submit reports on their follow-up intercultural activities in their local and national venues.

Members of AII have also contributed many publications in the area of interculturality in these first years. Five of them had chapters in the expansive 2015 two-volume academic work, edited by Lazar Stanislaus and Martin Ueffing, entitled *Intercultural Living* and *Intercultural Mission*.⁴⁶ On a more popular level, several AII members, many intercultural resource persons, some members of AJST and the two General Councils contributed to the publication in December 2017 of the 160-page booklet, *The Spirituality of Interculturality: Material for Retreats and Recollections of the Arnoldus Family*.⁴⁷ Also, AII members Kirby and Rödlach and fellow RCI member

⁴⁵ The four additions were Fernando Diaz (Chile), Seraphin Kpakpayi (Togo), Adriana Milmanda (SSpS, Argentina), and Ray Sudhiarsa (Indonesia).

⁴⁶ Lazar Stanislaus, SVD, and Martin Ueffing, SVD: Vol. I: *Intercultural Living* and Vol. II *Intercultural Mission* (Sankt Augustin, Ger.: Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, and New Delhi: ISPCK, 2015). Selected chapters from these volumes have been published by others in Spanish and English: *Interculturalidad: en la vida y la mission* (Estella, Spain: Editorial Verbo Divino, 2017); *Intercultural Living: Explorations in Missiology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018).

⁴⁷ Spanish edition: *La Espiritualidad de la Interculturalidad: Materiales para Retiros y Jornadas de Oración*.

Zackarias in 2017 published *Stories of Our Intercultural Living and Mission*.⁴⁸

It is quite clear that Anthropos Institute International developed a much closer relationship with the SVD by contributing very significantly from the beginning (pre-2012 Chapter commission) and through the RCI around the theme of interculturality, which enhances and contextualizes the Anthropos Tradition in the 21st century. Furthermore, it served as an impetus for strengthening fruitful collaboration between the SVD and SSsP and for developing an important link between interculturality and Arnoldus spirituality. We will demonstrate below how these two important dynamics will continue to blossom after 2017. However, before that, we need to indicate how Anthropos Tradition interculturality work enriched the wider church beyond the above-mentioned publications and the professional activities of many AII members.

Impact on the Wider Church

In 2018, many other religious congregations around the world had already begun reaching out to the SVD and SSsP as resources in the area of intercultural living and mission. For example, AII coordinator Roger Schroeder co-organized with Maria Cimperman, RSCJ, a three-year (2017-2020) interculturality program for twenty women's and men's religious congregations through Catholic Theological Union; and several RCI and/or AII members organized and gave presentations for a nine-day program for over fifty members of other religious congregations in Nemi in January 2018. Following this, a number of AII and/or RCI members co-organized the following intercultural programs sponsored by the UISG [International Union of Superior Generals (umbrella organization for two thousand women's congregations)] in Rome: 1) a two-week in-person program in January 2019 for 180 women religious from forty-five congregations in English, French, Italian, and Spanish; 2) an eight-day program via Zoom in December 2020 for 240 Sisters from 90 congregations;⁴⁹ 3) a seven-day program via Zoom in March-April 2021; 4) a six-day UISG-sponsored program via Zoom in December 2021 for Sisters from English-speaking countries in Africa. Countless other programs, presentations and consultations around the issue of interculturality for many other men's and women's religious congregations have been done by AII and/or RCI members and some of the SVD and SSsP interculturality resource persons, even during COVID-19.

⁴⁸ Jon Kirby, Alexander Rödlach, and Victor Zackarias, eds. *Stories of Our Intercultural Living and Mission* (Rome: SVD Publications, 2017).

⁴⁹ Several members of the General Council of the SSsP, the cloistered 3rd branch of the Arnoldus Family, also participated. See fn. 2.

Further Impact on the Arnoldus Family

Let us return to the specific developments within the Arnoldus Family after 2017. In the 2018 19th General Chapter, the SVD reaffirmed its commitment to interculturality.

Striving to live as truly intercultural communities is already a key element of our SVD mission (par. 27).

Living in international or multicultural communities can help us to open ourselves more to others.... However, building intercultural community is not only to live together with other nationalities and cultures, but further we mutually value and enrich one another (par 28).

Interculturality is part of our DNA (par 31).⁵⁰

Two of the Chapter resolutions called for further development and distribution of intercultural spirituality guides and programs (1.1.5) and the continuation of efforts toward fuller interculturality by providing the necessary structure, training, networking, and a platform for materials (1.1.6).⁵¹ As an implementation of the former resolution, a 185-page *Reflection Guide for Mutual Enrichment in Spirituality* was prepared by many SVD and SSps, including intercultural resource persons, RCI and AII members, and others, under the leadership of an *ad hoc* committee,⁵² and it was published in English and Spanish in 2020-2021.⁵³

This oft-mentioned SVD-SSpS collaboration continued to develop. In July 2019, the two congregational leadership teams reconfigured the RCI with five members each, with Adriana Milmanda, SSps, and AII coordinator Roger Schroeder, SVD, as the RCI co-chairs. Two other AII members⁵⁴ continued to be part of the RCI, but the circle of intercultural leadership continued to expand. The total number of RCI members was increased to twelve in 2022 to fill lacunae in geographical representation.

In terms of the link with spirituality, mentioned earlier, the RCI in response to the request from the two congregational leadership teams organized an in-person bilingual (Spanish-English) three-week program in Steyl on

⁵⁰ Documents of the 18th General Chapter SVD 2018, *In Word and Deed* no. 6 (August 2018).

⁵¹ *In Word and Deed* no. 6, 54.

⁵² Consisting of Peter Dusicka, Stanislaus Lazar, Maria Lilich, Leonie Pregunta, and AII member Roger Schroeder.

⁵³ *Reflection Guide for Mutual Enrichment in Spirituality: Materials for the Arnoldus Family* and *Guía de Reflexión para el Enriquecimiento Mutuo en Espiritualidad: Materiales para la Familia Arnoldina* (Rome: e-Publicaciones SVD-SSps, 2021.)

⁵⁴ Sebastian Michael, SVD, and Janet Florine Tellis, SSps.

“Spirituality and Interculturality” in January-February 2020 for thirty SVD-SSpS participants and three Lay Partners. The 2022 SSpS General Chapter (delayed two years due to COVID) asked RCI to assist in implementing three of their Chapter resolutions. The two General Councils re-established a new Arnold Janssen Spirituality Network (AJSN) in 2021 to succeed the former AJSC, which was temporarily suspended in 2018. The four core members and eight members of the expanded team of AJSN and seven members of RCI met in-person (plus three RCI members occasionally via Zoom) for four days in late February 2023 in Steyl, to discuss and plan collaborative efforts between the two groups. Much time was spent on planning the two jointly-sponsored programs⁵⁵ to be held simultaneously in Steyl in November 2023.

All of these developments illustrate how the efforts toward true interculturality have enhanced the charism, life and mission of the Arnoldus Family through the deepening relationship between the SVD and SSpS and between interculturality and spirituality. At the same time, the Anthropos Tradition has been a great resource for the broader church and society.

Conclusion

In this article, we described the deep and rich roots of the Anthropos Tradition as a central component of the SVD charism in three key figures of the founding generation—Schmidt, Janssen, and Freinademetz. Secondly, we see how the Anthropos Institute was founded and later restructured, as Anthropos Institute International, to safeguard and enhance this tradition among the AII members and affiliated institutes and the SVD Society. Third, the theme of the 2012 SVD General Chapter (and 2008 SSpS Chapter) on interculturality provided an explicit avenue and clear opportunity for AII to contribute to the life and mission of the Arnoldus Family. AII members formed half of the SVD pre-Chapter preparatory group and they proposed and carried out the initiative for what would evolve into the Resource Committee of Interculturality, with its numerous programs and activities. AII was a catalyst for the revival of the Anthropos Tradition in taking on flesh in enriching and challenging ways. Fourthly, interculturality has enhanced other key aspects of the heritage of the Arnoldus Family, namely the collaborative spirit and shared charism among the SVD and SSpS⁵⁶ and the essential link between their spirituality and

⁵⁵ Renewal Program for SSpS who have served 4-10 years outside their own country and Orientation for SSpS preparing to start a new mission in Congo.

⁵⁶ Initial conversations have begun regarding the possible involvement of the SSpSAP congregation in some RCI activities, and several members of their congregational leadership participated in a UISG interculturality program via Zoom in December 2020.

intercultural life (*ad intra*) and mission (*ad extra*), in all of its aspects. Finally, the efforts of the Anthropos Tradition through interculturality continues to enrich the other religious congregations and societies in general.

It is important to remember that witnessing to the Anthropos Tradition and deepening interculturality in life and mission continues to be an on-going challenge for the Arnoldus Family. It is very appropriate to do so as the SVD celebrate their 150th Anniversary. Sebastain Michael, SVD, stated it in this way, “Will the present SVD generation understand the pioneering work of the Anthropos Tradition and get energized to be creative in today’s mission?”⁵⁷

⁵⁷ S.M. Michael, “Interculturality and the Anthropos Tradition,” *Verbum SVD* 54, 1 (2013): 71.

Walking Together: Embracing Synodality for a United and Inclusive Church

Albano Da Costa, SVD

Introduction

The Catholic Church stands at a pivotal moment in history, called to renew itself in ways that reflect both its ancient tradition and the contemporary realities of its faithful. Central to this renewal is the concept of synodality—a term that encapsulates walking together as a community, listening deeply, discerning collectively, and acting in communion. This approach, emphasized by Pope Francis and enshrined in the recent 2021-24 Synod on Synodality, invites the entire People of God to participate fully and co-responsibly in the life and mission of the Church.¹

This reflection explores the journey toward embracing synodality as a transformative path for building a united and inclusive Church. Drawing upon insights from recent discussions, experiences from dioceses such as Broome and Brisbane, theological reflections, and ongoing initiatives, it explores that synodality is not merely a process but a way of being Church—one that honours diversity, fosters dialogue, and empowers all baptized members to contribute to the Church's mission.

¹ Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission: Final Document*, 2024.

Understanding Synodality: Walking Together as the People of God

Synodality derives from the Greek word *synodos*, meaning “walking together.” It reflects a vision of Church as a pilgrim People of God journeying together toward a common heavenly homeland. Rooted deeply in the ecclesiology of Vatican II, particularly in *Lumen Gentium*, synodality recognizes that all baptized persons share equally in dignity and mission. Bishop Tim Norton of Broome articulates synodality as an intentional act of communion and shared commitment, where every member, regardless of status, is invited to participate in discerning the voice of the Holy Spirit. This vision counters hierarchical exclusivity and fosters a more participatory Church, where listening and discerning happen not only among pastors but between pastors and the faithful. The recent Synod on Synodality culminated in a final document accepted wholly by Pope Francis, who entrusted the Church at large with its implementation. Far from a conclusion, the Synod marked a beginning—the start of a dynamic process of conversion, communal discernment, and co-responsibility.

The Ecclesiological Foundations of Synodality

The theological foundation of synodality is grounded in the Church’s nature as communion, participation, and mission. *Lumen Gentium* calls the Church a pilgrim people united in Christ, where baptism confers equal dignity and mission on all members.² This understanding challenges any clericalist or hierarchical model that excludes the laity from meaningful participation.

Moreover, synodality invites a renewed focus on baptism as the primary sacrament of mission and ministry, shifting some emphasis away from Eucharist-centric models that may inadvertently limit participation. This shift encourages recognition of the charisms and gifts of all the baptized and calls for structures that support co-responsible ministry.

Synodality also embraces the Spirit’s ongoing guidance, acknowledging that the Church’s journey is marked by conversion and openness to transformation. Bishop Norton highlights that synodality requires trust in the Spirit, willingness to take risks, and a readiness to face resistance and challenges.

² Vatican Council II, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November 1964,” in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: Trent to Vatican II*, ed. Norman P. Tanner and Giuseppe Alberigo (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), no. 32.

Synodality in Practice: Insights from Broome and Brisbane

The lived experience of synodality varies across contexts, shaped by geography, culture, and community dynamics. The Diocese of Broome, with its vast territory and unique cultural composition, offers a compelling example of synodality's contextual application.

Bishop Tim Norton describes Broome as a place marked by immense distances, diverse Aboriginal communities, and significant social challenges including intergenerational trauma and limited infrastructure. In this environment, synodality involves creative inclusivity—such as organizing pilgrimages that bring together people across tribal and family divides, fostering a shared sense of mission and belonging.³

Similarly, the Archdiocese of Brisbane illustrates synodality through its Synod 24 initiative, which engaged in extensive consultation to discern how to implement the Australian Plenary Council decrees. The process was marked by broad participation, communal discernment, and a commitment to transparency and accountability.

Steph Jorna, Brisbane's Synod Coordinator, emphasizes that synodality is not a mere list of actions but a lived experience of walking together, accompanied by the Spirit.⁴ Initiatives such as diocesan prayer vigils for domestic violence, discussions on LGBTQ+ inclusion, and refugee support panels demonstrate practical ways synodality enlarges the space of belonging—"enlarging the place of our tent" as a metaphor for inclusive community.⁵

The Role of Friendship, Dialogue, and Listening

At the heart of synodality lie friendship, dialogue, and deep listening. Australian Theologian in the areas of ecclesiology and synodality, Elissa Roper highlights that these elements cultivate vibrant ministries of healing, identity, and mission—ministry marked by generosity, courage, and shared responsibility.⁶

³ Tim Norton, "Making Synodality Work in Our Lives and Our Parishes," *Australian Coalition for Catholic Church Reform (ACCCR) Webinar*, June 26, 2025.

⁴ Steph Jorna, "Making Synodality Work in Our Lives and Our Parishes," *Australian Coalition for Catholic Church Reform (ACCCR) Webinar*, June 26, 2025.

⁵ General Secretariat of the Synod, *Enlarge the Space of Your Tent (Is 54:2): Working Document for the Continental Stage*, For a Synodal Church, 2021-24 (October 2022), 64.

⁶ Elissa Roper, "Making Synodality Work in Our Lives and Our Parishes," *Australian Coalition for Catholic Church Reform (ACCCR) Webinar*, June 26, 2025.

Friendship broadens circles of care and concern, reflecting Jesus' inclusive love. Dialogue softens hearts, expands minds, and opens spirits to conversion. Authentic listening requires practice, generosity, and the creation of safe spaces where all voices, especially the marginalized, can be heard.

Listening is not merely a technique but a spiritual discipline that discerns the voice of the Spirit in community. It recognizes that no single person holds the fullness of wisdom; rather, collective discernment reveals deeper truths and guides communal action.

Overcoming Challenges: Resistance, Fear, and Formation

While synodality offers a hopeful vision, its implementation encounters significant challenges. Resistance arises from fear of change, attachment to tradition, clericalism, and uncertainty about roles and authority.

Some people, including clergy and laity alike, express discomfort with the “messiness” of synodality, preferring clear structures and certainties. Others fear that synodality threatens established traditions or undermines familiar worship styles, such as the Latin Mass.

Addressing resistance requires patience, transparency, and the creation of psychologically safe spaces. It also demands formation that goes beyond formal education to include experiential learning—such as participation in prayer vigils, listening sessions, and communal discernment processes.

Formation must be holistic, accessible, and ongoing. It should empower all members—clergy and laity—to understand synodality's theological foundations, practical implications, and spiritual dimensions. Online resources, local gatherings, and mentorship can all contribute to this formation.

The Importance of Leadership and Empowerment

Leadership plays a crucial role in fostering synodality, yet the process does not depend solely on episcopal authority. Bishop Norton and others emphasize that waiting for permission from hierarchy risks indefinite delay. Instead, lay and clergy alike are encouraged to “be the change” by initiating synodal processes within their communities. This grassroots approach aligns with the ecclesiological principle of baptismal co-responsibility. It invites all members to discern their gifts and take initiative, trusting in the Spirit's guidance and the support of the wider community.

At the same time, bishops and clergy benefit from formation and experience in synodality to become effective collaborators and encouragers. Including women and laypeople in leadership and decision-making enriches the Church's witness and effectiveness.

The Role of Women in Synodality and Leadership

A synodal Church must be inclusive of all baptized members, particularly women, whose gifts and leadership remain underrepresented in many contexts. The recent address by Patti Beattie, Head of Pastoral Discernment and Accompaniment in Broken Bay Diocese, highlights the ongoing cultural transformation towards greater inclusion of women in leadership and shared mission.⁷

Beattie's work involves designing pastoral discernment projects that invite deep listening and broad participation, fostering formation that empowers women and men alike. Parishes are moving from closed pastoral councils to open parish-in-council gatherings, where all voices are welcomed and appreciated.

Building leadership that honours cultural diversity, individual gifts, and networks of encouragement is vital for a mature, responsible, and loving Church. The hope for regional summits and ongoing formation underscores the Church's commitment to this path.

Synodality Beyond Geography: Digital and Relational Networks

Synodality is not confined to physical gatherings. It extends into networks of relationships, including digital spaces, which can connect diverse communities across vast distances. However, challenges such as limited internet access, especially in remote areas like Broome, remind us that synodality must also honour traditional, in-person presence and engagement.

The Church's credibility in many rural and Indigenous communities rests on faithful presence, turning up, and building relationships. This underscores that synodality is fundamentally relational—it is about walking together as people who know, respect, and accompany one another.

⁷ Patti Beattie, "On the Road to More Women Leaders in the Church," *CathNews*, June 20, 2025.

Conclusion

Embracing synodality offers the Catholic Church a profound opportunity to renew its life and mission as a united and inclusive community. It calls all baptized members to walk together, listen deeply, discern collectively, and act co-responsibly. Rooted in the ecclesiology of Vatican II and energized by the Spirit, synodality fosters friendship, dialogue, and conversion.

The lived experiences of dioceses like Broome and Brisbane demonstrate that synodality is both a challenge and a grace—a messy, demanding, yet deeply enriching way of being Church. It requires courage to overcome resistance, openness to formation, and willingness to act without waiting for authorization.

Central to synodality is the inclusion of all voices, especially those marginalized, including women, Indigenous peoples, youth, and the digitally disconnected. By enlarging the space of the tent, the Church becomes a more vibrant, compassionate, and missionary community.

As Pope Francis reminds us, synodality is the path forward for a Church that listens, walks together, and embraces the joy of shared mission. The call is clear: do not wait, get going, and trust the Spirit to guide us on this transformative journey.

Maximum Illud: Challenges Then, Challenges for the Church Today

Stephen Bevens, SVD

We live today in an era of “World Catholicism,” or, as Karl Rahner called it in a celebrated article, an era of the “world church.”¹ A first glimpse of this new era, Rahner wrote, could be seen in the composition of the bishops participating in the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). At the First Vatican Council in 1870, he noted, there were no indigenous bishops from Africa or Asia present. A hundred years later at Vatican II, though, despite the fact that “not at all in proportion to the representation of the Western episcopate,” a representation of bishops from Asia, Africa, and Oceania “*was there*.”² Today, more than sixty years after the start of the council, the “center of gravity” of Catholicism itself has shifted to these areas of the world, along with Latin America, and Pope Francis—himself a Latin American—appointed a good number of bishops from these countries to the College of Cardinals. More than at any time in the church’s history, cardinals who elected Francis’s successor came from these majority world churches. The face of Catholicism in the last century—not only its leadership but the entire People of God—has undergone a shift that can only be called “epochal.”³

Why has this shift come about? One principal reason, argues historian Dale T. Irvin, is that the church’s missionary movement, especially that undertaken in the nineteenth century, was actually successful. This is indeed “the great truth of World Christianity.”⁴ Why was it successful, however? Among

¹ See K. Rahner, “Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 40 (1979), 716-27.

² Rahner, 718.

³ See W. Bühlmann, *The Coming of the Third Church: An Analysis of the Present and Future of the Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1974), ix.

⁴ D.T. Irvin, “What is World Christianity?” in *World Christianity: Perspectives and Insights*, ed. J.Y. Tan and A.Q. Tran (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 2016), 11.

Catholics it might well be argued that a principal reason for such success was the breakthrough in missionary thinking articulated in the document, the centennial of which we celebrated in 2019: The Apostolic Letter (Encyclical) *Maximum Illud*, published on November 30, 1919 by Pope Benedict XV.⁵

My reflections in this essay will focus on this groundbreaking document, and I will proceed in three parts. First, I will briefly reflect on reasons why Benedict was moved to write the Apostolic Letter—the challenges then. Second, I will even more briefly outline the main contents of the letter and sketch its reception within the church. Third, I will offer some reflections on several challenges that, should the encyclical be written today, might be addressed in the context of today's church, described by Pope Francis as “a community of missionary disciples.”⁶

The Challenging Context of the Apostolic Letter

When Giacomo della Chiesa, Archbishop of Bologna, was elected pope on September 3, 1914 to succeed Pius X, the choice was a rather surprising one for many. He had only been named cardinal four months previously and was relatively unknown among Roman circles. When American James Cardinal Gibbons arrived in Rome late for the conclave and was told who the new pope was, he is reported to have asked “Who's he?”⁷ But the electing cardinals had chosen well. Historian Andrzej Miotk writes that della Chiesa “was a very carefully calculated choice.”⁸ A veteran of years in the Vatican's Secretariat of State, he was “equipped with a solid knowledge of politics and diplomacy,” knowledge that was to serve him well as he tried over and over again—unsuccessfully—to help bring the conflict of the Great War to an end and—more successfully—provided much needed humanitarian services for its victims.⁹

⁵ *Maximum Illud* is often referred to as a “mission encyclical,” the first of five issued from 1919 until the eve of the Second Vatican Council. The official name for the document is “Apostolic Letter” (see the title on the Vatican website). In his important article on the document, Andrzej Miotk opts to use the term “encyclical,” since it addresses the entire church. See the reference to the document and to Miotk's article in the notes below.

⁶ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, 24.

⁷ See J. F. Pollard, *The Unknown Pope: Benedict XV (1914-1922) and the Pursuit of Peace* (London: Geoffrey Chapman 1999), xiii.

⁸ A Miotk, SVD, “The Historical Significance and Prophetic Resonance of the Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud* on the Centenary of Its Publication,” *Verbum SVD* 60 (2019): 15.

⁹ Miotk: 19; Pollard, 112-39. See also V. O. Iheanacho, “Benedict XV and the Rethinking of Catholic Missionary Strategy,” *Tripod* 38 (2016): 78-94.

Benedict was appalled by the War, calling it a “useless slaughter” and the “suicide of civilized Europe.”¹⁰ It was not a “just war” in the Augustinian sense. Rather there was fault on both sides, fueled especially by “the raging fires of nationalism.”¹¹ After the War as well, Benedict was appalled at the fact that the Versailles Treaty was based on that same destructive nationalism and not on Christian principles.¹² He and his choice as prefect of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, Cardinal Willem van Rossum,¹³ recognized that the same extreme nationalism that had caused the War was to lead to the demise of the entire colonial system with which the church’s missionary efforts were inextricably involved.¹⁴ It was in this context of anti-nationalism and the recognition that “‘the credit of European civilization’ in the colonies was gone”¹⁵ that *Maximum Illud* had its origins.

Andrzej Miotk situates *Maximum Illud*, at least indirectly, in the developing missiology of Europe, especially in Germany. However, several Italian sources were significant as well, especially that of Italian Paolo Manna, Archbishop Maria Guido Conforti (founder of the Xaverian Missionaries) and Giuseppe Allamano (founder of the Consolata Missionaries). We might say, however, that the “existential” origins of the Apostolic Letter came from the actual situation in mission countries, especially but not exclusively in China.¹⁶ Already in 1847, Vincentian missionary to China Joseph Gabet had written to Pius IX defending criticisms by missionaries of local Chinese clergy and promoting a more contextualized form of Christianity. In the early twentieth century Vincentian Chinese missionaries Antonio Cotta and Vincent Lebbe called for the leadership of local clergy and their appointment as bishops.¹⁷ Opposition to such moves was strong among French missionaries. As Jacques

¹⁰ Benedict XV, Apostolic Exhortation *Dès le Début*, August 1, 1917, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* (1917), 423. This document is otherwise known as “The Peace Note”; Benedict XV, *Lenten Letter to Cardinal-Vicar Pompili* March 4, 1916, published in the *New York Times*, March 6, 1916, 1. These references are cited in A. de Dreuzy, *The Holy See and the Emergence of the Modern Middle East* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press 2016), 24; and Miotk, 12, respectively.

¹¹ De Dreuzy, 24.

¹² Miotk, 15, referring to Pollard, 75.

¹³ Dutch Cardinal Van Rossum was sometimes referred to as the “second founder” of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith and served under Benedict and Pius XI until 1932. See V. O. Iheanacho, “*Maximum Illud* and Its Relevance in Contemporary Mission,” *Tripod XXXIX* (2019): 85–86.

¹⁴ See Miotk, 19.

¹⁵ De Dreuzy, 165, quoting Lady Francis (sic) Bell, ed., *The Letters of Gertrude Bell* (New York: Boni and Liveright 1929), 2:404.

¹⁶ Miotk, 21. See also L. Ha, “*Maximum Illud*: An Apostolic Letter of Great Impact on Catholic Missionary Work in China,” *Tripod XXXIX* (2019): 66–73.

¹⁷ Iheanacho, “Benedict XV,” 89–90.

LeClercq writes in his biography of Père Lebbe, “The missionaries were haunted by the fear that pride would drive the Chinese to revolt [as had happened in the Boxer Rebellion of 1900] and so the great thing was to keep them [i.e. the Chinese clergy] in a state of humility. That was why it was regarded as sufficient if they were pious and obedient. And of course they were expected to fill only subordinate positions in any case. . . . European arrogance was everywhere.”¹⁸ Leclercq describes the situation in a village where a Chinese priest had been assigned as pastor and was joined several months later by a French priest who knew practically no Chinese. “The Chinese priest still had to do all the work in the parish, but the European was the boss—it was unthinkable that a Chinese priest should be on the same footing as a European.”¹⁹ Such situations were repeated time and time again.

In the mid-nineteenth century, through a series of treaties with the Chinese government, France had established itself as the sole protector of missionaries in China, no matter what nationality they were.²⁰ What was clear, however, was that the French not only “protected” the missionaries; they were using their position to gain both political power and economic gain in the country. In 1886 the Vatican began negotiations for direct contact with the Chinese government, something France bitterly opposed and succeeded in blocking.²¹ In 1918 Benedict XV tried to convince France of the importance of having a papal nuncio in the Chinese capital, but such efforts were “met with the procrastination of the ‘first daughter of the Church’.”²² This may have been the last straw. Centuries before the establishment of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith had its origins in the Vatican’s desire to free missionary work from the domination of Portugal and Spain.²³ Now Benedict and his Prefect of the Propaganda Fide van Rossum were moving to free missionary work in China and in other colonies from the domination of France and other colonial powers.

Against exaggerated and destructive nationalism, and in an effort to make the church truly catholic, Benedict XV, influenced by new missiological thinking, inspired by the vision of forward-looking missionaries, and guided by the wisdom of a great prefect of the Propaganda Fide, issued the Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud* on November 30, 1919.

¹⁸ J. Leclercq, *Thunder in the Distance: The Life of Père Lebbe* (New York: Sheed and Ward 1958), 55-56.

¹⁹ Leclercq, 58.

²⁰ Iheanacho, “Benedict XV,” 83-87.

²¹ Leclercq, 49.

²² Iheanacho, “Benedict XV,” 86.

²³ Iheanacho, “Benedict XV,” 85; See also A. C. Ross, *A Vision Betrayed: The Jesuits in Japan and China, 1542-1742* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1994), 184-85.

The Content of the Apostolic Letter: The Challenges Then

Compared to many papal documents today, *Maximum Illud* is short, “not much more than a dozen pages.”²⁴ Despite its brevity and sometimes rather outdated theology and language, however—e.g. identifying the church with the Kingdom of God (8, 11, 20), focusing only on “foreign missions” (7),²⁵ speaking of missionaries as “troops of Christ” to “wrest... people from the clutches of the devil” (35)—it is a breakthrough, revolutionary document. This is on account of four major challenges that it poses.

Against “Congregationalism”

The first challenge is expressed in the section directed to “those in charge of the missions”—vicars and prefects apostolic and superiors of religious congregations of men (8-17). Benedict encourages these superiors to open as many centers of mission activity as possible, so that these can be used for future vicariates and prefectures. He commends those leaders who have done this, especially those who “if they find that their order or congregation is not supplying enough manpower for the task, they are perfectly willing to call in helpers from other religious groups” (11). Apparently, however, as Fr. Gabet had written some sixty years before,²⁶ this practice was still not all that common. Gently but firmly, therefore, Benedict chides those superiors who do not reach across boundaries of religious orders and nationalities to seek help in their work for evangelization. The good mission leader “does not mind whether they belong to his order or to another, or whether or not they are of his nationality, ‘provided only that, in every way... Christ is being proclaimed’ (Phil 1:18).” Such reaching out to other congregations included reaching out to women’s congregations as well, so that they could open “schools, orphanages, and hospitals” and “to found their hostels and establish other charitable institutions” (12). Any kind of exclusive “congregationalism,” especially that tinged with narrow nationalism, would be unworthy of the seriousness of the mission effort.

²⁴ C. Tauchner, SVD, “The Greatest and Most Holy Task,” *Verbum SVD* 60 (2019): 5.

²⁵ Benedict XV, Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud*, https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xv/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xv_apl_19191130_maximum-illud.html. References will be in parentheses in the text.

²⁶ Iheanacho, “Benedict XV,” 88.

Education of Local Clergy

A second challenge of the Letter is perhaps the one for which it is best remembered: Benedict's insistence on the proper training of local clergy so that they might eventually take up leadership in the various local churches. "In this policy," Benedict writes, "lies the greatest hope of the new churches. For the local priest, one with his people by birth, by nature, by his sympathies and his aspirations, is remarkably effective in appealing to their mentality and thus attracting them to the Faith" (14). Benedict insists, moreover, that such training should be "first class." The education of local candidates "should be complete and finished, excellent in all its phases, the same kind of education for the priesthood that a European would receive" (15). Local clergy should not—as Père Lebbe had described—be ordained simply to assist the foreign missionaries but should be given equal pastoral responsibilities. From these well-trained priests would come bishops who would be worthy leaders of the local church. Indeed, Benedict writes, a truly universal church should be led by those who "come from every nation, so that their countrymen can look to them for instruction in the law of God and leadership on the way to salvation" (16).

Benedict did not live to see such a local episcopate, but in 1923 his successor Pius XI appointed the first Indian bishop in the Latin Rite and chose two Chinese priests as prefects apostolic. Pius ordained the first Chinese bishops at St. Peter's in 1926.²⁷ To offer a few more examples: With the blessing of Benedict XV, the first seminary for African Americans was established by the Society of the Divine Word in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi in 1920, with the first ordinations in 1934.²⁸ In the late 1920s, the Society of the Divine Word began admitting Filipinos—not without some hesitation and controversy.²⁹ By 1933, there had been established twenty-two regional seminaries in China.³⁰

Against Nationalism

In the section of the Letter that addresses the missionaries themselves, Benedict focuses on a third challenge. This was the strong nationalism that was both preventing the mission churches from becoming truly local churches

²⁷ Leclercq, 242.

²⁸ See C. Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 234-35; E. Brandewie, *In the Light of the Word: Divine Word Missionaries of North America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2000), 229.

²⁹ See F. Scharpf, SVD, "'Why Did We Not Do This Much Earlier?' A Position Paper of the House Council of the Vigan Major Seminary, 1930," *The Ilocos Review* (1975-1976): 75-86.

³⁰ Miotk, 27.

and binding missionaries more to their home countries than to the needs of the church in which they were working. Benedict does not mince words:

It would be tragic indeed if any of our missionaries forgot the dignity of their office so completely as to busy themselves with the interests of their terrestrial homeland instead of with those of their homeland in heaven. It would be a tragedy indeed if an apostolic man were to spend himself in attempts to increase and exalt the prestige of the native land he once left behind him. ... For no matter how wild and barbarous a people may be [note the out-of-date language!], they are well aware of what the missionary is doing in their country and what he wants for them. ... such a situation could easily give rise to the conviction that the Christian religion is the national religion of some foreign people ... (19).

On the contrary, Benedict insists, “the true missionary is always aware that he is not working as an agent of his country, but as an ambassador of Christ” (20).

Again, Benedict did not live to see it, but in 1924, under the Apostolic Delegate Archbishop Celso Constantini, a synod was held in Shanghai that forbade missionary interference in local Chinese politics and ordered respect for Chinese authorities.³¹ “Henceforth, the buildings of missionary congregations could no longer indicate their countries of origin; instead missionaries had to mark the entrances of mission stations with Chinese names.”³²

Missionary Training

In the same section addressing missionaries, Benedict offers a fourth challenge in the Apostolic Letter—adequate missionary training. He calls for a broad education in all branches of learning. Even though “converting the minds of men” to “the refinements of virtue are more valuable than a knowledge of the fine points of literature” (22), the more learned missionaries are the better able they would be to cope with the difficulties of their apostolic life and to answer the difficult questions of the people among whom they work. Benedict calls for such an education to be offered at the Urbanianum, where many indigenous men and future missionaries were being trained. In particular, he calls on the Urbanianum to institute courses of missiology within the university’s curriculum (23). He also calls for missionaries to thoroughly learn the local language so that the faith might be adequately communicated to the peoples whom the missionaries serve (24).

³¹ Miotk, 28.

³² A.M. Wu, *From Christ to Confucius: German Missionaries, Chinese Christians, and the Globalization of Christianity, 1860-1950* (CT: Yale Uni. Press 2016), 129. Quoted in Miotk, 28.

Shifts in Presentation and Mission Theology

Andrzej Miotk highlights the “deep spirituality and apostolic zeal” of the Letter, reflecting “the attitude of a determined reformer with the foresight of a strategist.”³³ *Maximum Illud* is not a dry, legal document but one that evidences real concern on the part of the pope and calls for a deep spiritual commitment on the part of missionaries. Miotk also points to a real shift in mission thinking that the Letter evidences. Mission in the Letter is both catholic and ecclesiological. Mission in its essence crosses national and cultural boundaries and is central to the church’s life.

Maximum Illud “was a fresh breath of mission enthusiasm with a deep sense of duty towards the mandate to evangelize.”³⁴ It may not have offered a deep theology of mission, and it continued to see mission as focused on individual conversions and establishment of the church.³⁵ Nevertheless, in many ways it anticipated the breakthrough in mission theology and practice offered in Vatican II’s document on mission, *Ad Gentes*.³⁶ John Pollard suggests that *Maximum Illud* pointed missionary work in an anticolonialist direction and laid the foundations (as I pointed out in the introduction to this essay) of the world church. He calls it the “most significant papal pronouncement” on mission until Paul VI’s *Evangelii Nuntiandi* in 1975.³⁷

Miotk observes that the Apostolic Letter was “not exactly well received” by everyone in the church. Appearing just one year after the end of the Great War, it was not well known in Europe and seemed irrelevant to the many problems that existed there.³⁸ While a minority in the missionary world welcomed it, the majority basically opposed it. “‘The Pope has been misled’, said some; ‘following him would mean disaster.’ ‘The Holy Father is trying to move far too quickly,’ said others; ‘no doubt what he says is quite true, but he doesn’t realize the complexity of the problems’.”³⁹ “Only with time,” writes Andrzej Miotk, “were the fundamental change in perspective and the prophetic

³³ Miotk, 38.

³⁴ Miotk, 39.

³⁵ On this, Miotk refers to my book with R. Schroeder: S. B. Bevans and R. P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2004), 244. See Miotk, 38-39, note 100.

³⁶ Vatican Council II, Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes* (AG), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html.

³⁷ Pollard, 213-14; 204; Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN), http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html.

³⁸ Miotk, 39; Leclercq, 212-13.

³⁹ Leclercq, 212-213.

foresights of *Maximum Illud* recognized.”⁴⁰ Today, indeed, we recognize that the centenary of this document is worth celebrating.

Challenges for the Church Today

A century is a long time, and particularly in this last century the world that Benedict knew in 1919 has changed dramatically: another devastating war, the virtual end of colonialism and the independence of most colonized territories, the Cold War and the rise of Communism, , and then its demise in 1989, the hopes for a “New World Order” and the dashed hopes after 9/11, the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, the rise of radical Islam and other fundamentalist movements, the sexual revolution and the emergence of women’s rights, the AIDS crisis, the ecological crisis, the optimism of Vatican II and subsequent polarization of the church, the sexual abuse crisis worldwide, the cyber revolution, globalization and the emergence of world Christianity, the shift in Christianity’s center of gravity, the changing face of the world due to global migration and the re-emergence of populism and nationalism—a phenomenon I recently heard referred to as “Slowbalisation.”⁴¹ In this context, how might Benedict write *Maximum Illud* today? How might Benedict challenge us today, given that the “greatest and most holy task” of preaching the gospel is still as valid as ever.

I’d like to suggest four challenges that Benedict might give us today. In some ways they are similar to the challenges he gave us a century ago. In other ways, however, they are quite different and perhaps more acute. There are no doubt more challenges that could be mentioned. The four that I would propose, however, are these: (1) the importance of recognizing the radical missionary nature of the whole church, wherever it exists; (2) the need to accelerate the process of inculturation by the courage to take more risks and be more creative; (3) the necessity of rethinking our understanding of ministry and governance in the church; and (4) the opportunities offered by a wider catholicity and a deeper interculturality.

The Missionary Nature of the Whole Church

Maximum Illud takes for granted that when one spoke of mission, one meant “the missions” or “foreign missions.” This is clear in paragraphs 7, 8,

⁴⁰ Miotk, 39.

⁴¹ “The steam has gone out of globalization—’slowbalisation,’” *The Economist* (January 24, 2019), <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2019/01/24/the-steam-has-gone-out-of-globalisation>.

and 10, and in the language Benedict uses for “those in charge of the missions” (prefects and vicars apostolic [9]), the missionaries themselves (presumably foreigners), and how people can help the missions by prayer and economic help (supporting the Holy Childhood that arranges Baptism for dying children of non-Christian families [38]).

Today, however, although the foreign missionary task is still very much valid, it has become clear that the entire church in every part is and should be “permanently in a state of mission.”⁴² The church, as Vatican II put it, is “missionary by its very nature,” and this is a lens through which the entire ecclesiology of the council needs to be re-read.⁴³ We are no longer in the context of Christendom. There are no longer “sending countries” and “mission countries.” The former “sending countries” are generally places of disillusionment with the church and places of unbelief. And so there is need of dialogue with such secular cultures and efforts to make the church “attractive.” Many former “mission countries,” although thriving centers of Christianity—are still minority Christian and need to engage in interreligious dialogue, as well as in movements of social and ecological justice. As Pope Francis said powerfully, there is need for a “missionary option,”⁴⁴ by which everything in the church’s attitude needs to change. Francis really calls for a kind of “Copernican revolution” in ecclesiological and pastoral thinking and practice, so that everything the church does is “suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for [its] self-preservation.”⁴⁵

The Apostolic Constitution on the reform of the Roman Curia, significantly entitled *Predicate Evangelium*,⁴⁶ “is entirely consistent with the *ad extra* missionary orientation of Francis’ ecclesiology.”⁴⁷ The document combines the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization into one, now named the Dicastery for Evangelization. The consideration of this new dicastery comes *before* the consideration of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, indicating that doctrine

⁴² EG, 25.

⁴³ AG, 2. See S. Bevans, SVD, “Church in Mission,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Vatican II*, ed. R. R. Gaillardetz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2020), 139-56; See also S. B. Bevans, *Community of Missionary Disciples: The Continuing Creation of the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2024).

⁴⁴ EG, 27.

⁴⁵ EG, 27.

⁴⁶ Pope Francis, Apostolic Constitution *Pradicate Evangelium*, On the Reform of the Roman Curia and Its Service to the World (March 19, 2022), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/20220319-costituzione-ap-predicate-evangelium.html.

⁴⁷ R. R. Gaillardetz, “Francis’ Draft of Curial Reform Fundamentally Reimagines Vatican’s Role,” *National Catholic Reporter* (Online version), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/francis-draft-curial-reform-fundamentally-reimagines-vaticans-role>.

is at the service of mission, rather than the reverse. This is truly extraordinary and reflects subtly yet unmistakably the radical missionary nature of the church in every place where it finds itself. Some of the more controversial proposals offered at the Pan-Amazonian Synod of October 2019—e.g. the ordination of married men and the proposed Amazonian rite—come out of the same insight into the missionary, evangelizing nature of the church.⁴⁸

A papal Apostolic Letter or encyclical that would insist on this missionary priority in no uncertain terms would offer a real breakthrough in ecclesiology and church practice. It would point to the fact that *every* situation in which the church finds itself is one in which missionary boundary crossing is necessary. It would highlight the multi-faceted nature of evangelization—not just the preaching of the gospel but the incarnation of the gospel in commitment to social justice, ecological activism, interreligious dialogue and collaboration, and inculturation of the gospel message and church structures. Indeed, to be Christian is to be a “missionary disciple,” one who shares the life of a missionary God.

More Creative Efforts of Inculturation

Benedict’s insistence that missionaries learn local languages well (24-25), that they should have “intimate acquaintance” (25) with local ways,⁴⁹ be adequately prepared, study missiology (23), and that local clergy should have the best possible education (14-17) are glimmers of what has become a strong papal call for the inculturation of the gospel. We see further openness to local cultures in Pius XI’s famous Universal Mission Exhibition in 1925 and several positive statements in the writings of Pius XII,⁵⁰ all of which solidified in the documents of Vatican II, especially the document on mission and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.⁵¹ Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* wrote about the importance of the “evangelization of cultures,” not in a

⁴⁸ See Austen Ivereigh, “When the Amazon Meets the Tiber,” https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/when-amazon-meetstiber?utm_source=Main+Reader+List&utm_campaign=7b36402f12-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_03_16_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_407bf353a2-7b36402f12-91248885.

⁴⁹ Benedict is referring to training for missionaries preparing to work for the “Churches of the East,” but he does it, it seems, as an analogy for preparation for missionary work in general.

⁵⁰ See J. Kroeger, MM, “Papal Mission Wisdom: Five Mission Encyclicals 1919-1959,” in *A Century of Catholic Mission*, ed. S. B. Bevans (Oxford: Regnum Books 2013), 95-97; Pius XII, Encyclical Letter *Evangelii Praecones*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_02061951_evangelii-praecones.html, 56-61.

⁵¹ AG, 11, 22; Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html, 53-62.

superficial way but “in depth and right to their very roots,” and John Paul II spoke and wrote often about the importance of inculturating the gospel.⁵² In 2023, Pope Francis emphasized that “theological reflection is therefore called to a development, to a change of paradigm, to a “bold cultural revolution” . . . that lets it be, in the first place, *a fundamentally contextual theology*, capable of reading and interpreting the Gospel according to the conditions in which women and men live their daily lives, in diverse geographical, social, and cultural situations and taking as an archetype the Incarnation of the eternal *Logos*, his entrance into culture, within a particular worldview, with a religious tradition of a people.”⁵³

Despite this growing encouragement, progress in the actual inculturation of the gospel has been slow and hesitant, and often under suspicion. There were indications by Pope Francis, however, that a bolder, more creative approach to inculturation should be taken. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he warned that orthodox language can sometimes be misunderstood so that people “take away something alien to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” The “greatest danger” is such misunderstanding, and so real efforts to communicate the gospel meaningfully is an absolute necessity.⁵⁴ Later on in the document, Francis discouraged people who communicate the gospel “by fixed formulations learned by heart or by specific words which express an absolutely invariable content.” Even though there is danger in the process, we need to take the risk of developing new ways to communicate the gospel. Despite the danger, “if we allow doubts and fears to dampen our courage, instead of being creative we will remain comfortable and make no progress whatsoever.”⁵⁵

In 2019, at the start of the Pan-Amazonian Synod, Francis prayed that the Holy Spirit gift the bishops gathered in Rome with the Spirit’s own “*daring prudence*” as it deliberates about how to be faithful to the gospel message and the mission entrusted to them. Prudence, the Pope explained is no virtue of the “‘customs house’.” It is rather a Christian virtue, one that “Paul places in opposition to timidity.”⁵⁶

⁵² EN, 20; The term “inculturation” appeared for the first time in John Paul’s Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendi* in 1979 (See http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_16101979_catechesi-tradendae.html, 53); See John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (RM), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html, 52-54.

⁵³ Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html. My translation. The document appears only in Latin and Italian.

⁵⁴ EG, 41.

⁵⁵ EG, 129.

⁵⁶ Pope Francis, Homily at the start of the Pan-Amazonian Region Synod, 6 October, 2019, <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2019/documents/papa-francesco>

A mission encyclical today should be very strong and clear about this. We urgently need to inculturate the gospel, not only in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania, but in the secularized cultures of the West, among youth, in the context of migration, in the context of ecological disaster, in the context of the new tribalism and nationalism brought on by the phenomenon of “Slowbalisation.” Rather than be concerned about the dangers, the limits of inculturation—how far can we go—an encyclical has to encourage us to take risks and be as creative as we can be. The gospel demands it. Mission demands it.

Rethinking Ministry and Governance in the Church

Probably the most important and memorable challenge of *Maximum Illud* is its insistence on the development of local clergy, so that the gospel might be heard in ways that only those who are locally born and raised can communicate it. In addition, local clergy should be educated at the same level as European missionaries so that gradually they could take over the leadership of the local church. Benedict recognized that ministry and authority need to serve mission rather than vice-versa. Mission, in other words, is not for the sake of ministry or the exercise of authority. Rather, mission and authority should inspire ministry and shape it. Mission called for a rethinking of ministry and authority in the church in Benedict’s time, and it calls for their rethinking today.

The failure to do such rethinking a hundred years ago resulted in a church that was out of touch with the local people and the local culture, giving the impression that Christianity was only a way of having colonized people submit to Western governments. The failure to do this today is one of the causes of the worldwide sexual abuse crisis, a crisis that has given the church and its leadership a lack of credibility for many people within and without it. An inadequate theology of ordained ministry and ministerial authority has resulted in a clericalism that has not only taken privileges for granted in the church and in society but has led to untold harm done to an untold number of young women and men in the church’s history. On the other hand, as the recent Pan-Amazonian Synod has recognized, the needs of mission calls the leadership of the church to rethink its long-standing policy of clerical celibacy and consider the ordination of proven local leaders of a community, married or not. It also calls for rethinking of the role of leadership of women in the church.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ 20191006_omelia-sinodo-amazonia.html. See also the Working Document for the Synod, which refers to Francis’s call for “‘courageous’ proposals” and “‘daring’ and ‘fearless’ attitudes”: <http://www.synod.va/content/synod/it/attualita/synod-for-the-amazon--preparatory-document--amazonia--new-paths-.html>, 14.

⁵⁷ Working Document of the Pan-Amazonian Synod, 14.

Along the same line, Pope Francis called for a greater exercise of episcopal collegiality and has even called for an exercise of “synodality” in the entire church. At the beginning of *Evangelii Gaudium*, he insists that “It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense I am conscious of the need to promote a sound ‘decentralization’.”⁵⁸ He said very much the same thing in his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*.⁵⁹ As Fordham University Professor Bradford Hinze points out in an article on Francis’s ecclesiology, Francis chose, at the ceremony celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Synod in 2015, to speak of synods as times of “journeying together”: “It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium—journeying together—laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome—is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice.”⁶⁰

Mission calls for a rethinking of ordained ministry that is clearly distinct from the common priesthood of all believers but at its service, calling Christians to more active and more committed missionary discipleship.⁶¹ Mission calls for more lay ministers to work hand in hand with their ordained brothers, shaping and forming the church as a community of missionary disciples. Mission calls for a greater role of women in ministry in whatever way possible. Mission calls for the leadership of the church to listen to laity, lay ministers, deacons and priests, and fellow bishops so that a real synodality can be effected at every level. *Maximum Illud* called for bold rethinking then for the sake of the gospel. Our times call for bold rethinking now.

Radical Catholicity and Interculturality

Central to *Maximum Illud* is its opposition to nationalism. As we have seen, nationalism was behind the “useless slaughter” that was World War I, and it was behind much of the suspicion with which mission was regarded as

⁵⁸ EG, 16.

⁵⁹ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (AL), https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf, 3.

⁶⁰ Quoted from “Address at the Ceremony,” in B. Hinze, “The Ecclesiology of Pope Francis and the Future of the Church in Africa,” *Journal of Global Catholicism* 2 (2017): 14. <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1019&context=jgc>. See Francis’s address at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

⁶¹ EG, 104. See the paper “To Serve the People of God,” the product of a two-year seminar by the faculty of Boston College in *Origins* 48 (2018): 484-93. See also R. R. Gaillardetz, T. H. Groome, and R. Lennan, ed., *Priestly Ministry and the People of God: Hopes and Horizons* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022), especially S. Bevans, SVD, “Ordained Discipleship,” 132-139.

this age of nationalism and colonialism came to an end. If the church was to have a future in this emerging new world, local clergy and foreign missionaries had to be equals, and foreign missionaries had to learn to respect and appreciate the local government and local culture. We have come very far in the century since, and now the challenge is for the appropriation of a wider catholicity in the church as a whole and within local churches as well.

In the church as a whole, the challenge is, on the one hand, to foster local culture and customs, and to engage in the creative and even risky business of inculturation that I talked about in my reflections already. On the other hand, however, the challenge is to be open to the inculturation efforts of other local churches, to engage with them, and to learn from them. The importance of this second task is expressed powerfully by the U.S. bishop Robert McElroy of Washington, D.C., one of the few non-Amazonian delegates to the Pan-Amazonian Synod. An article in the *National Catholic Reporter* tells of how McElroy spent the first week of the Synod simply listening—listening to the experience of people whose voices are often not heard either in the church and society. When he finally spoke in the assembly, it was to appreciate how much the synod experience could enrich the experience of the church in the United States, and in his own diocese particularly. “[T]he church of the Amazon has illuminated a grace-filled pathway for the embrace of synodality that will enrich regional and local churches throughout the world.”⁶²

McElroy appreciated, first, how the synod “places the pastoral imperative at the heart of the church’s theology and mission”—in other words, as we have said, it is mission that should guide all decision-making in the church. Second, McElroy said, the synod offers the rest of the church, and the world, a “witness to the nature and power of ecological conversion.” It shows the rest of the church and witnesses to the world how important it is to take seriously the urgent message of Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’*.⁶³ Third, McElroy cited a phrase in the working document of the Synod: “good living.” Perhaps the simplicity of life in the Amazon is not transferrable to the United States or other parts of the world, he said, but he reflected that the phrase’s “underlying themes of connectedness, moderation, balance and sharing must become the norm for all peoples in reevaluating our lifestyles if we are to escape the lures of materialism and build a sustainable society for our world.”

⁶² T. Reese, “American bishop says Amazon synod will enrich the church—and our lives,” *National Catholic Reporter* (online), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/signs-times/american-bishop-says-amazon-synod-will-enrich-church-and-our-lives?clickSource=email>. Subsequent citations in this paragraph are from this article.

⁶³ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’*, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html.

Theologian Robert Schreiter observed that the mark of catholicity is the mark of the church that needs to have the most prominence today in our church life. Such “wholeness and fullness through exchange and communication,”⁶⁴ as Schreiter defined it, seems to continue *Maximum Illud*’s appreciation of the importance of the local for the good of the universal church, but in a way that is particularly appropriate for our complex world today.

One might speak of the development of a kind of “local catholicity” as well. Here current reflections on the importance of “interculturality” might be helpful to negotiate the rich cultural diversity present in many regions and dioceses of the world. The achievement of such interculturality begins with the *fact* of multiculturalism and moves to a practice of mutual enrichment and challenge that goes beyond mere toleration of other cultures to a deep learning from each other that results in mutual transformation.⁶⁵

A mission encyclical today might also include the cultivation of interculturality in many women’s and men’s religious communities around the world today—especially missionary communities. Anthropologist and missiologist Anthony Gittins espoused Chinese American Eric Lau’s emphasis on “radical welcome” of members of every culture in such religious communities.⁶⁶ As missiologist Marcelo Cattaneo expresses it, interculturality is achieved when it focuses on “no longer just a folkloric aspect but rather [is] an experience of unity in the gospel spirit. ... when we go beyond the cultural interpretations of our common task and allow ourselves to be guided by congregational and gospel criteria ... when we can be open to the novelty as we encounter in each person who sees, thinks and feels in a different manner, without inhibitions or complexes, without pride or prejudice.”⁶⁷

Interculturality, either in terms of “local catholicity” or within religious communities, is not easy. It is the result of a long and often difficult process. As former SVD superior general Antonio Pernia has written, interculturality needs “to be consciously created, intentionally promoted, carefully cared for,

⁶⁴ R. J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (NY: Orbis Books 1997), 128. For this definition, Schreiter quotes German theologian Siegfried Wiedenhofer, *Das katholische Kirchenverständnis* (Graz: Verlag Styria 1992), 279.

⁶⁵ See R. P. Schroeder, “Intercultural Perspective,” in *Missionary Discipleship in Global Contexts*, Studia Instituti Missiologici SVD 112, ed. L. Stanislaus and v. T. Nguyen (Siegburg, Germany: Franz Schmitt Verlag 2018), 157.

⁶⁶ A. J. Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally: Faith, Culture, and the Renewal of Paxi* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, A Michael Glazier Book 2015), 178-86. See also R. P. Schroeder and M. Cimperman, ed., *Engaging Our Diversity: Interculturality and Religious Life Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020).

⁶⁷ M. Cattaneo, “Missionary Avenues and Challenges,” in *Light Shining in Darkness: PANAM Pathways of Mission* (Rome: SVD Publications 2016), 85.

and attentively nurtured.”⁶⁸ But it is a challenge that is worthy of *Maximum Illud* taken seriously today.

Conclusion

Maximum Illud, as I have said, was a revolutionary, breakthrough document, one that has been called the “Magna Carta” of modern mission thinking and practice.⁶⁹ It is certainly a document the anniversary of which is worth celebrating. Our celebration, however, should not just be an appreciation of what the Apostolic Letter accomplished, but an opportunity to see how its spirit might inspire us today. As we commit ourselves to understanding the radical missionary nature of the church in every situation on earth, as we commit ourselves to more courageous efforts of inculturating the gospel, as we commit ourselves to rethinking the shape of authority and ministry in the church, and as we commit ourselves to a more profound catholicity and interculturality—all commitments that are deeply interconnected—our anniversary celebration will indeed be a worthy one.

⁶⁸ Antonio M. Pernia, “The SVD in the Year 2012. Report of the Superior General to the XVII General Chapter,” in *SVD Mission in 2012: Sharing Intercultural Life and Mission* (Rome: SVD Publications 2012), 36. Quoted in Paulus Budi Kleden, “Trinitarian Spirituality and Interculturality,” in *Intercultural Living*, ed. L. Stanislaus and M. Ueffing (Sankt Augustin / New Delhi: Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut / ISPCCK 2015), 34.

⁶⁹ Kroeger, 94.

Faithful and Creative Disciples in a Wounded World: A Communicative Paradigm for Mission

Kasmir Nema, SVD

Introduction: Reclaiming Mission through Communication

In the shifting contours of the 21st-century world—marked by digital transformation, ecological crisis, social fragmentation, and renewed spiritual longing—the Catholic Church stands at a communicative and missionary crossroads. The Jubilee Year 2025, framed by the theme “*Pilgrims of Hope*,” offers a unique ecclesial moment—a *kairos*—to reflect on how the Church embodies and transmits its mission in wounded contexts. At the heart of this reflection is a pivotal insight: communication is not auxiliary to mission, but intrinsic to it. It is through communication—understood not merely as information transfer but as relational, dialogical, and symbolic engagement—that the Church becomes a credible witness to the Gospel.

This essay examines the communicative dimensions of the Church’s missionary identity within the theological and pastoral horizon of Jubilee 2025. It argues that the Church must transition from monological proclamation to synodal dialogue; from doctrinal assertion to incarnational witness; and from hierarchical control to co-responsible participation. Drawing inspiration from the charism and praxis of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD), the work situates missionary communication within a spirituality of encounter—one that is deeply rooted in the mystery of the Word made flesh. In this emerging model, the Church is envisioned as a *pilgrim communicator*—listening attentively, discerning faithfully, and proclaiming courageously in the language of diverse cultures, the wounds of the world, and the silence of the Spirit.

Anchored in the theological insights of recent pontificates—particularly those of Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis—the paper outlines a communicative ecclesiology that is prophetic, pastoral, and intercultural. It contends that to be truly missionary, the Church must be transformed into a community of presence and dialogue: one that speaks hope in fractured contexts, embodies Eucharistic solidarity, and heals through relational proximity. The Jubilee is thus interpreted not as a liturgical celebration alone, but as a call to reimagine the Church’s communicative vocation considering synodality, mysticism, and social justice.

Recognizing this urgent call, the following sections will explore how the Church—drawing particularly on the missionary spirituality and communicative praxis of the SVD—can embody a more relational, dialogical, and contextually grounded approach to mission. Anchored in theological reflection and inspired by the pastoral orientations of the 19th SVD General Chapter, this essay will examine key dimensions of communicative discipleship in a wounded world. These include cultivating a spirituality of woundedness, embracing prophetic dialogue, and engaging creatively with diverse cultures, faith traditions, and digital spaces. By integrating insights from contemporary missiology, ecclesiology, and intercultural communication theory, the discussion will outline concrete pathways through which the Church can witness to the light of the Gospel with credibility, compassion, and hope in our fractured global context.

In light of this ecclesial and missiological horizon, it becomes essential to consider how the Church’s communicative identity is reframed when viewed through the lens of pilgrimage. As both metaphor and lived ecclesial experience, pilgrimage offers a compelling paradigm for understanding mission in a wounded world. It evokes movement, vulnerability, encounter, and ongoing conversion—qualities that lie at the heart of synodality and authentic missionary communication. The following section will therefore explore how pilgrimage, as a theological and pastoral motif, offers the Church a renewed framework for embracing synodal processes and fostering a logic of encounter. Within this paradigm, communication becomes not merely a functional strategy but an embodiment of the Church’s vocational journey toward deeper communion with God, humanity, and creation. The following section will therefore explore how pilgrimage, as a theological and pastoral motif, offers the Church a renewed framework for embracing synodal processes and fostering a logic of encounter. Within this paradigm, communication becomes not merely a functional strategy but an embodiment of the Church’s vocational journey toward deeper communion with God, humanity, and creation.

Pilgrimage as a Paradigm: Synodality and the Logic of Encounter

The image of pilgrimage—central to the Jubilee—invites the Church to embrace movement, mutuality, and shared vulnerability. To be a pilgrim is to embark on a journey enriched by communion, not traveled alone but shared with others. This dynamic finds deep resonance in Pope Francis' call for a synodal Church—a Church that listens, walks, and discerns together.¹

Such ecclesiology requires a reorientation of the Church's communicative stance: from hierarchical proclamation to dialogical encounter, from monologue to mutual discernment. As Paul VI in *Gaudium et Spes* affirms, the Church must engage the world “by entering into dialogue with it about all that concerns humanity.”²

This communicative pilgrimage is also intercultural. Especially in the SVD's missionary practice, it entails openness to languages, customs, and narratives beyond the familiar. To walk together across cultural boundaries is not to erase difference, but to sanctify it as a site of grace. In such spaces, communication becomes an act of justice, hospitality, and theological humility.

Moreover, pilgrimage affirms that Christian discipleship is a process, not a destination. It rejects static ecclesial models in favor of dynamic responsiveness to the Spirit's movement through history and context. As Pope Francis emphasizes in *Evangelii Gaudium*, a Church that goes forth must be “capable of being constantly self-renewed.”³ Pilgrimage fosters this renewal by compelling the Church to engage with the joys and wounds of the world through practices of listening, lament, and accompaniment. The act of walking with others—especially the excluded, disillusioned, or spiritually searching—becomes a catechetical gesture that precedes words and doctrines.

This paradigm also challenges the Church to develop new forms of participatory communication. Pilgrimage, unlike institutional programs, cannot be scripted; it unfolds through trust, discernment, and mutual presence. In this

¹ Pope Francis, “Address of His Holiness on the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops,” October 17, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

² Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, December 7, 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

³ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.pdf.

light, synodality is not a bureaucratic strategy but a spiritual posture. The preparatory document for the Synod on Synodality notes that the Church is called “to learn how to walk together and to discern the path that the Spirit invites us to take.”⁴ This discernment unfolds not only in councils or official documents but also within local communities—through storytelling, moments of silence, honest conversations, diverse perspectives, and healing dialogue.

Finally, pilgrimage renews the Church’s symbolic and sacramental imagination. As a metaphor for ecclesial life, it reminds the Church that authority must be exercised in motion, service, and relational transparency. Walking together involves shared risk and mutual conversion. The Jubilee call to become “Pilgrims of Hope” is thus not a sentimental image—it is a prophetic invitation to embody communication as communion. In the footsteps of Christ on the road to Emmaus, the Church must become a companioning presence, where hearts burn not because of institutional prestige, but because the Word is shared in solidarity and bread is broken in trust (Luke 24:13–35).

Proclaiming Hope: Witness as Language

In an age of disillusionment and despair, Christian communication must be rooted in hope—not as optimism, but as eschatological defiance against cynicism. As John Paul II observed in *Redemptor Hominis*, the Church must become “expert in humanity,” offering responses that speak not only to doctrines but to desires, fears, and longings.⁵ Hope must be embodied. The Church speaks most credibly when her communication flows from lived witness rather than theoretical assertion. Pope Paul VI echoes this: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers.”⁶ The missionary disciple, then, is not a transmitter of dogma but a narrator of grace, whose life speaks healing in the language of accompaniment, mercy, and resilience.

In digital cultures where noise overwhelms meaning, communicators must be both spiritually grounded and creatively expressive—narrating the Gospel not only in catechetical terms but through symbolic gestures, artistic media, and presence that consoles. Hope is not shouted—it is shared.

⁴ Synod of Bishops, *Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Synodality: For a Synodal Church—Communion, Participation, Mission*, 2021, <https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-preparatory-document.html>.

⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*: Encyclical Letter, 1979, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-

⁶ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization in the Modern World, December 8, 1975, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html.

Witness, in this sense, becomes the Church's most authentic language. As Francis emphasizes in *Evangelii Gaudium*, true proclamation arises from a "missionary joy" that goes beyond obligation—it draws others into encounter with the living Christ.⁷ This joy is not naïve, but resilient: it remains even in wounded contexts and sustains communities through crisis. The Church's hope, therefore, is not persuasive because it solves suffering, but because it accompanies it faithfully.

Art, ritual, and storytelling are vital channels for this hopeful witness. From the Stations of the Cross to digital testimonials, symbolic language allows the Church to communicate the Gospel in forms that penetrate both intellect and imagination. As Pope Francis argues in *Laudato Si'*, care for creation is not merely ethical—it is poetic; the Church's hope for the world must be expressed in ways that restore beauty, harmony, and communion with the Earth.⁸ Hope becomes a performative language: it lives in aesthetics, gestures, and silence.

Moreover, prophetic hope involves confronting systems of death with truth-telling love. Witness is not merely pastoral—it is political. The Church proclaims hope by resisting racism, exclusion, ecological degradation, and exploitation. It lifts up the stories of those silenced by systemic sin and, in doing so, reveals the Kingdom breaking into history. As Francis declares in *Fratelli Tutti*, "hope speaks of something deeply rooted in the human heart" that motivates active love and justice.⁹

Finally, this communicative hope must be communal. Testimony becomes credible when shared across cultures, generations, and vocations. The pilgrim Church walks together in hope—not only proclaiming it, but enacting it through synodal processes, intercultural dialogue, and Eucharistic solidarity. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, "Hope is always a journey," one that binds the Church to the world in mutual transformation.¹⁰ This journey requires disciples who communicate not just with words, but with their whole lives.

⁷ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*: Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

⁹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*: Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi: Encyclical Letter on Christian Hope*, 2007, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html.

Mysticism and Mission: The Inner Grammar of Communication

A truly missionary Church must be contemplative. Without mysticism, communication devolves into strategy. Without mission, mysticism collapses into withdrawal. The fusion of these two realities generates a “grammar of encounter” that undergirds all authentic communication. Pope Francis consistently reminds us that the heart of evangelization lies in silence, prayer, and discernment.¹¹ Mystical experience opens communicators to speak not from anxiety or ideology, but from communion with Christ. As seen in the lives of figures like St. Óscar Romero and St. Teresa of Calcutta, effective proclamation flows from contemplative attentiveness. In this light, communication becomes sacramental—it renders visible the invisible. In an age addicted to spectacle, the Church must reclaim the countercultural language of stillness, vulnerability, and listening. The Jubilee calls the Church both to proclaim and to behold—to communicate God through speech as well as through silence.

Mysticism, in this context, does not refer to extraordinary visions or esoteric practices, but to a posture of radical attentiveness to God’s presence in history and human experience. As Pope Francis observes, “without prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the Word, of sincere conversation with the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless.”¹² The mystic is not someone who escapes the world but one who sees the world more deeply. This deep seeing—this contemplative gaze—fosters a communication that listens before speaking and discerns before acting. In missionary contexts, this gaze allows one to see Christ in the faces of the poor, the migrants, the wounded, and the overlooked.

Contemplation also shapes the tone and method of Christian communication. It tempers urgency with humility and replaces control with surrender. In the 2023 *Message for World Communications Day*, Pope Francis calls for communicators who “speak with the heart,” insisting that authentic communication arises from a “merciful gaze that heals.”¹³ The mystic-communicator does not aim to dominate the narrative but to co-suffer, to co-interpret, and to co-witness. In this view, communication becomes a liturgical act—an

¹¹ Pope Francis, General Audience, Saint Peter’s Square, September 28, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2022/documents/20220928-udienza-generale.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

¹² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*.

¹³ Pope Francis, *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 57th World Day of Social Communications*, January 24, 2023, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/20230124-messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html>.

extension of the Eucharistic mystery in which we offer not just words, but ourselves.

Moreover, mysticism enables a missionary Church to navigate the noise and fragmentation of digital culture. The digital world often thrives on immediacy, outrage, and superficiality. By contrast, mystical communication insists on depth, discernment, and presence. As theologian Karl Rahner famously asserted, “the Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all.”¹⁴ In a time when algorithms shape attention and truth is contested, mystically grounded communicators can offer a stabilizing and soul-restoring presence that points beyond distraction to the eternal.

The tradition of the SVD is particularly instructive in this regard. Rooted in the spirituality of St. Arnold Janssen, the SVD integrates mission and contemplation through practices like *Lectio Divina*, adoration, and intercultural prayer. These disciplines cultivate a mysticism that is both communal and missional. For SVD missionaries, communication is not merely a professional task but a spiritual vocation—a call to incarnate the Word through presence, humility, and listening across cultures. It is this mystically charged communication that enables the Church to speak prophetically without becoming ideological, to proclaim truth without violence, and to bear witness to the Gospel in ways that heal rather than divide.

Finally, the Jubilee Year 2025 offers a *kairos* moment for renewing the Church’s contemplative identity. It challenges ecclesial institutions to prioritize spiritual formation over managerial efficiency, to create spaces for silence in an overstimulated world, and to recover the slow, sacramental pace of grace. As the Church seeks to become a “Pilgrim of Hope,” it must first become a contemplative communicator—one who transmits not only knowledge but presence, not only doctrine but mystery. In this sense, mysticism is not optional for the missionary Church; it is its deepest grammar.

Communicating in a Wounded World: Reading the Signs of the Times

The Church’s mission is shaped by theological principles as well as lived realities. Today’s communicative challenges are deeply tied to the *signa temporum* (Signs of the Times)—secularization, inequality, environmental collapse, pluralism, and displacement.

¹⁴ Patricia Carroll, “Moving Mysticism to the Centre: Karl Rahner (1904–1984),” *The Way* 43, no. 4 (October 2004): 41–52.

Secularism challenges the Church to reframe proclamation as invitation, not imposition. Narrative theology, testimonial preaching, and creative storytelling can offer reentry points into a culture disenchanted with institutional religion. As Benedict XVI noted, faith today must be proposed through beauty and meaning rather than imposed through authority.¹⁵ The Church, therefore, must become a storyteller—offering glimpses of transcendence through ordinary witness and deeply human language.

Global inequality reveals that communication is also a justice issue. The voices of the poor are often silenced, while dominant narratives reinforce power structures. Missionary communication must therefore become an act of advocacy—listening to, amplifying, and learning from the margins. Pope Paul VI urged that the Church be “expert in humanity,” which includes a capacity to speak with and not merely about the suffering.¹⁶ Media ministries and pastoral formation must prioritize participatory communication, enabling the marginalized to become agents of their own narratives.

Ecological devastation is both a scientific and narrative crisis. In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis reframes creation care as a theological imperative—insisting that environmental degradation is a symptom of spiritual disorder.¹⁷ Therefore, the Church should communicate ecology both through institutional statements and through liturgical gestures, artistic expression, and ecological catechesis. As the Earth “groans” (Rom. 8:22), the Church must learn to speak in lament and hope, offering a renewed language of kinship and covenant with all creation.

Migration, finally, is a communicative frontier. “Migrants are not a burden; they are a gift,” says Pope Francis, affirming that the displaced possess both dignity and theological insight.¹⁸ The Church must shift from treating migrants as recipients of charity to protagonists of communal renewal. Testimonial storytelling, cross-cultural liturgies, and digital platforms can help rehumanize public discourse, challenging xenophobic narratives with Gospel-rooted solidarity. In doing so, ecclesial communication becomes a form of restorative justice.

¹⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, “Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections,” Lecture at the University of Regensburg, September 12, 2006, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html.

¹⁶ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

¹⁷ Francis, *Laudato Si’*.

¹⁸ Pope Francis, *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 108th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2022*, September 25, 2022, accessed June 10, 2025, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/20220509-world-migrants-day-2022.html>.

Pluralism, too, redefines the Church's communicative vocation. In an age of cultural fragmentation and religious diversity, dialogue becomes not optional but constitutive of mission. Pope Francis's vision of a "culture of encounter" requires communicators to listen across differences and speak in ways that foster mutual transformation.¹⁹ Interreligious dialogue, arts-based ministry, and intercultural competence are now essential to missionary formation. The Church's witness is no longer just doctrinal—it is dialogical, performative, and relational, shaped by the grammar of shared humanity and sacred difference. These wounded contexts call for a renewed communicative ethic, one rooted in contemplation, shaped by proximity, and enacted through creative fidelity. The credibility of the Church's message in the 21st century depends not only on what she proclaims but on how, where, and with whom she communicates.

A Synodal Future: Toward Co-Responsible Communication

The future of the Church's mission is not individualistic or hierarchical—it is collaborative and co-responsible. Synodality, in this sense, is a communicative spirituality. Every baptized person is a communicator of the Gospel, and every voice is needed to discern the Spirit's movement. This vision echoes Pope Francis's articulation of a "synodal Church," one that listens before it teaches and walks together in mutual discernment.²⁰ This demands a new formation paradigm. Missionaries must be equipped not only in theology, but in intercultural competence, trauma-informed pastoral care, and nonviolent communication. Women, laity, and youth are to be empowered as essential protagonists, playing active and indispensable roles in shaping ecclesial life and mission. As Francis has emphasized, "lay people are, put simply, the vast majority of the people of God," and their voices must shape ecclesial mission.²¹

Digital tools, if used with discernment, can support synodal participation. But the real transformation lies in relational presence and Eucharistic humility. As the Church journeys through the Jubilee, she is called to embody her own message—becoming a space of dialogue, accompaniment, and prophetic

¹⁹ Pope Francis, Address of His Holiness on the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, October 17, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

²⁰ Francis, *Address of His Holiness*.

²¹ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*.

imagination. Synodality, then, is not simply a structure; it is a spiritual disposition of attentiveness and inclusion.

The synodal path also challenges traditional notions of ecclesial authority. It replaces the image of the Church as a monologue with that of a “polyphony of voices,” in which diverse experiences—particularly those at the margins—are not only heard but help to shape the Church’s mission.²² In this model, bishops are not merely decision-makers but facilitators of dialogue and discernment.

Effective co-responsibility also requires ecclesial transparency. A synodal Church is a listening Church, but also one willing to examine its failures and communicate with integrity. Pope Francis has urged Church leaders to resist the temptation of “clericalism,” which distorts the Church’s identity by excluding the People of God from discernment processes.²³ Synodality, by contrast, invites a culture of humility, accountability, and mutual learning.

A co-responsible Church also reimagines the liturgy and sacraments as communicative events. The Eucharist, for example, becomes more than ritual; it becomes a site of shared memory, embodied proclamation, and relational communion. Here, communication is not about efficiency or persuasion—it is about participation in the mystery of grace. In such a space, every act of listening, forgiving, or accompanying becomes sacramental.

Finally, this vision of communication challenges the Church to invest in formation programs that train facilitators, not just teachers; listeners, not just speakers. As synodal processes expand globally, formation must include skills in mediation, group discernment, digital dialogue, and narrative leadership. The missionary disciple is thus not just a catechist or preacher—but a weaver of communion.

Communicating in a Wounded World: Witnessing to the Light through Faithful and Creative Discipleship

The contemporary global landscape presents the Church—and in particular the Society of the Divine Word (SVD)—with an array of multifaceted and interrelated crises. Rising social and economic inequalities, environmental degradation, forced migration, escalating cultural polarizations, and a

²² Pope Francis, Address at the Opening of the Works of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission,” Paul VI Audience Hall, October 4, 2023, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/october/documents/20231004-apertura-sinodo.html>.

²³ Francis, *Address of His Holiness*.

deepening sense of spiritual fragmentation together constitute what theologians and missiologists increasingly identify as a *signs of the times* requiring urgent and theologically reflective missionary engagement.²⁴ These are not merely socio-political issues; they are existential wounds—both anthropological and ecological—that pierce the very fabric of human and cosmic communion. As such, they demand a missionary response that is not only contextually relevant but also theologically grounded, spiritually mature, and communicatively transformative.

The 19th General Chapter of the SVD emerges as a significant ecclesial and missiological milestone in this regard. Rooted in the theological motif "*Embracing a Wounded World and Our Own Woundedness*," the Chapter foregrounds the Church's and the Congregation's vocational imperative to engage with the suffering of the world from a position of vulnerability and solidarity. It calls for "prophetic dialogue and transformative communication," inviting missionaries to embody a praxis-oriented spirituality that listens deeply to the "groaning of creation" and the cries of marginalized humanity.²⁵ The Chapter recognizes that effective mission in this epochal moment must move beyond didactic proclamation toward a dialogical and participatory communication model shaped by empathy, intercultural awareness, and pastoral sensitivity.

This vision aligns closely with Pope Francis's magisterial articulation of a "*culture of encounter*," as expressed in *Evangelii Gaudium* and further developed in *Fratelli Tutti*. Francis consistently urges the Church to resist modes of communication that are triumphalist, abstract, or exclusionary, and instead embrace a dialogical disposition that prioritizes mutual listening, bridge-building, and accompaniment.²⁶ The SVD Chapter document reflects this ecclesiological sensibility by emphasizing the urgent need for communicative practices that foster healing rather than perpetuate harm, promote inclusion rather than deepen marginalization, and cultivate authentic communion rather than reinforce patterns of alienation and exclusion.

The SVD's Jubilee theme, "*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*," provides a rich theological hermeneutic through which the woundedness of the world may be engaged missiologically. This theme reflects the universal catholicity of the Church's mission while emphasizing the intercultural and transnational character of the SVD charism. As missionaries

²⁴ Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

²⁵ Society of the Divine Word (SVD), *Documents of the 19th General Chapter SVD 2024* (Rome: SVD Publications Generalate, 2024).

²⁶ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium & Fratelli Tutti*.

dispersed across diverse cultural and geopolitical contexts—Africa, Asia, Europe, the Americas, and Oceania—SVD members are summoned to bear witness to the light of Christ, not from positions of power or privilege, but from shared human vulnerability and ecclesial solidarity.

The Chapter document, *"Our Light Must Shine Before Others: Faithful and Creative Disciples in a Wounded World,"* offers a profound pastoral, theological, and missiological framework for such witness. It invokes the biblical imagery of light not as a symbol of doctrinal superiority but as a metaphor for transformative presence, relational fidelity, and incarnational solidarity. The document insists that SVD missionaries must cultivate the disposition of *wounded healers*—those who, drawing from their own experiences of brokenness and grace, enter into “prophetic dialogue” and facilitate “transformative communication” that speaks hope, justice, and healing into contexts of systemic violence, environmental devastation, and socio-spiritual alienation.²⁷

Communication within this theological paradigm is reconceptualized not as a unidirectional transmission of catechetical content but as a deeply relational, dialogical, and sacramental praxis. Drawing on Robert Schreiter’s theology of reconciliation and intercultural communication, the SVD approach embraces communication as an act of hospitality, presence, and participatory engagement.²⁸ It calls for the co-creation of spaces where marginalized voices are amplified, silenced stories are heard, and collective healing becomes possible.

This creative and faithful discipleship necessitates the adoption of a variety of communicative modalities that are contextually grounded and theologically intentional:

- **Narrative theology and storytelling methodologies** with marginalized communities that make visible their pain, resilience, and hope. Such storytelling is not a peripheral activity but a *locus theologicus* where God’s presence in history is discerned and celebrated.
- **Ecological communication and eco-theology** that integrate the insights of *Laudato Si’* into local eco-pastoral initiatives, thus framing environmental activism as a form of sacramental solidarity with creation.
- **Digital and social media ministries** that utilize contemporary communication technologies not merely for dissemination but as platforms for community-building, intercultural dialogue, and prophetic advocacy for justice and peace.

²⁷ SVD, *Documents of the 19th General Chapter*.

²⁸ Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

- **Interreligious and intercultural dialogue** that affirms the sacred narratives of non-Christian traditions while witnessing to the transformative power of the Gospel. Such dialogue is itself a form of *Missio Dei*, participating in God's ongoing action in the world.

The Jubilee's missiological call to *witness to the light* further impels the SVD to transcend conventional borders—whether geographical, cultural, social, or digital—and carry the Gospel into spaces of darkness where hope has been eclipsed. Yet this missional light must never be coercive or triumphalist. Rather, it must emerge from a kenotic, self-emptying love that reflects the incarnational logic of the Word made flesh (Jn 1:14), manifesting itself through empathetic listening, prophetic truth-telling, and participatory dialogue.

Operationalizing this vision demands strategic and theological intentionality from SVD communication ministries:

- **Trauma-informed pastoral care formation:** Missionaries must be equipped to offer psychosocial and spiritual care in post-conflict settings, refugee camps, and disaster-stricken communities.
- **Intercultural competence and sensitivity training:** Content and modes of communication must reflect the pluriform beauty of human cultures while avoiding ethnocentrism or theological reductionism.²⁹
- **Faith community formation as sites of Eucharistic solidarity and prophetic praxis:** These communities should function as embodied signs of hope, where liturgy and justice meet, and where the communication of faith is intrinsically tied to social transformation.

In this integrated theological and missiological horizon, the SVD's thematic emphases—"*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*" and "*Faithful and Creative Discipleship in a Wounded World*"—converge into a unified, Spirit-led ecclesial posture. It is a call to become a Church that listens deeply, accompanies courageously, and proclaims hope credibly—through life, word, and sacramental presence. By embodying the light of Christ in the world's darkest and most wounded places, the SVD continues to bear witness to God's irrevocable commitment to healing, justice, and reconciliation.

²⁹ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

Conclusion: Communicating in a Wounded World— Becoming What We Proclaim

To be faithful and creative disciples in a wounded world requires the Church to embrace a profound reorientation in how she understands, embodies, and practices communication. The call to “Communicating in a Wounded World: Witnessing to the Light through Faithful and Creative Discipleship” is not simply a thematic directive; it is an ecclesial conversion, inviting the Church in general and SVD members in particular to move from proclamation rooted in power and certainty to witness grounded in vulnerability, humility, and relational presence. Jubilee 2025 marks not merely a liturgical event but a *kairos*—a decisive time of grace that summons the entire People of God to incarnate the very Gospel they proclaim: to become pilgrims rather than wielders of power, listeners rather than mere teachers, and reconcilers rather than distant institutional figures.

In the face of mounting global crises—ecological devastation, forced migration, systemic injustice, cultural polarization, and spiritual disenchantment—the Church stands at a critical missiological crossroads. These are not peripheral challenges but deeply theological signs of the times. They represent anthropological and ecological wounds that rupture the communion between God, humanity, and creation. In this context, communication cannot remain an ancillary activity of mission. It must emerge as a core expression of the Church’s identity—missionally transformative, contextually sensitive, spiritually grounded, and prophetically bold.

The 19th General Chapter of the SVD articulates this vision with clarity and pastoral urgency. Rooted in the theme “Embracing a Wounded World and Our Own Woundedness,” the Chapter calls SVD missionaries to cultivate a spirituality of woundedness. Here, mission flows not from triumphalism but from shared vulnerability and solidarity with the brokenness of the world. Effective communication, according to this vision, begins with deep listening—to the “groaning of creation,” to the lament of marginalized peoples, and to the Spirit’s movement within contexts of violence, displacement, and exclusion.

This ecclesiological and pastoral vision finds resonance in Pope Francis’s theology of encounter. In *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Fratelli Tutti*, the Pope challenges the Church to dismantle communicative structures that are abstract, hierarchical, or exclusionary, and instead foster a dialogical, participatory, and relational mode of evangelization. The Church is called to listen before speaking, to accompany before instructing, and to build bridges before drawing boundaries.

To embody this vision, communication within the SVD must take on diverse and theologically intentional forms. Storytelling with marginalized communities must be embraced as a *locus theologicus*—a space where God’s salvific action in history becomes visible through human narratives of pain and hope. Ecological communication, inspired by *Laudato Si’*, must reframe environmental advocacy as sacramental solidarity with creation. Digital and social media platforms must become spaces not of mere information dissemination but of authentic intercultural dialogue and prophetic advocacy for justice and peace. Interreligious dialogue must become not simply an intellectual exercise but an embodied recognition of God’s presence within the sacred stories of others, participating in the ongoing *missio Dei* that transcends religious boundaries.

The call to witness to the light requires SVD missionaries to cross not only geographical borders but also cultural, social, ecclesial, and digital frontiers. Yet this light-bearing mission must remain grounded in kenosis—a self-emptying love that reflects the incarnational logic of the Word made flesh (John 1:14). The proclamation of the Gospel must flow from empathetic listening, prophetic truth-telling, and dialogical engagement that upholds human dignity and fosters hope in even the most broken contexts.

Such a paradigm shift cannot remain theoretical. It necessitates intentional and ongoing formation. Trauma-informed pastoral care must become a priority, equipping missionaries to accompany communities living in the aftermath of violence, migration, or ecological catastrophe. Intercultural competence and theological sensitivity must shape the content and delivery of all communication, ensuring that the Church’s witness reflects the diverse beauty of human cultures and avoids all forms of ethnocentrism or reductionism. Furthermore, local faith communities must be nurtured as sites where Eucharistic solidarity and prophetic praxis converge, becoming living sacraments of hope, justice, and reconciliation.

In this integrated theological and missiological horizon, the SVD’s dual themes—“*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*” and “*Faithful and Creative Discipleship in a Wounded World*”—converge into a singular Spirit-led ecclesial posture. The Church is invited to become not merely a speaker of the Word but a living embodiment of the Word, communicating through gestures of compassion, ecological witness, intercultural dialogue, trauma healing, and narrative justice.

In sum, to communicate in this wounded world is not merely to inform but to incarnate. To evangelize is not merely to proclaim but to become a living sign of the Gospel—a Church that listens deeply, accompanies courageously, and proclaims hope credibly through life, word, and sacramental presence. This is the true meaning of Jubilee: a radical call to communion, expressed not through

institutional slogans but through lived, credible, Eucharistic presence—a Church offering not dominance but dialogue, not ideology but intimacy, not spectacle but the quiet, faithful witness of love.

Evangelization in Papua New Guinea: Essential Cultural Elements, Missionary Opportunities, Challenges, and Hopes¹

Michael Nguyen, SVD

Before His ascension, Jesus entrusted His disciples with a universal mandate: to proclaim the Gospel to all nations. This missionary imperative is consistently attested across the four canonical Gospels. In Mark, Jesus commands, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mk 16:15). In Matthew, He exhorts the disciples to “make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). Luke and Acts highlight the necessity of proclamation, stating that “repentance for the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Lk 24:47) and “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The Gospel of John likewise reinforces this commissioning: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (Jn 20:21).

This mission mandate is not confined to the first generation of disciples; it is a continuing vocation addressed to all Christians across history. Evangelization, therefore, entails the proclamation of Jesus Christ to all peoples, transcending geographical, religious, and cultural boundaries.

Papua New Guinea (PNG), a Pacific nation located north of Australia and east of Indonesia, received the light of the Gospel through the Marist missionaries, who arrived in Milne Bay in 1847. They were later followed by the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC), who began their work in East New Britain in 1882, and the Divine Word Missionaries (SVD), who established

¹ This essay is dedicated to Fr. Patrick “Kevin” Cantwell SVD, author of *Missionary*, whose work inspired the writer to embrace his mission in Papua New Guinea.

their presence in Madang in 1896.² Alongside Catholic efforts, various missionaries from other Christian churches also established their presence in PNG during the 19th and early 20th centuries. These combined missionary endeavors contributed significantly to the religious transformation of the country.

Today, nearly two centuries later, Christianity is deeply embedded in the life of the nation, with the Constitution explicitly recognizing it as the foundational faith. Nevertheless, PNG retains a rich and complex cultural landscape. Evangelization in this context assumes distinctive characteristics, shaped by indigenous worldviews, linguistic diversity, and ongoing social transformation.

This essay begins by articulating a theological understanding of the Church's identity and mission. It then examines the particular context of PNG as a country marked by both cultural plurality and deep Christian affiliation. This is followed by an analysis of the opportunities and challenges of evangelization in a predominantly Christian yet rapidly evolving society, especially in light of the ongoing demographic shift in Christianity from the global North to the global South and the pervasive effects of globalization. Finally, inspired by the Catholic Church's Jubilee Year 2025, under the theme "Pilgrims of Hope," the essay offers a theological reflection titled "Hope in the Sacred Garden," exploring the author's commitment to mission within the PNG context.

The Identity of the Church

According to Matthew 16:18, Jesus is understood to have founded the Church. As the Gospel narrative unfolds, the reader comes to recognize the Church as the instrument of God's salvific plan, *Missio Dei*, entrusted with the proclamation of the Gospel to all peoples. In this way, the Church not only embodies but also perpetuates Christ's mission of evangelization.

As affirmed by the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium*, the Church is "the universal sacrament of salvation," called to make Christ present in every age.³ Likewise, Pope Paul VI emphasized in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* that the Church "exists in order to evangelize,"⁴ continuing the mission of Christ through preaching, witness, and service.

² Mary R. Mennis, "Foreword" to Paul B. Steffen, *Sios bilong Yumi long Nougini* (Madang: Society of the Divine Word, 2022), 11-13.

³ Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, ASS 56 (1964), no. 48.

⁴ Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation to the Episcopate, to the Clergy and to all the Faithful of the Entire World *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, AAS 67 (1975), no. 14.

The Term *Missio*

The term *missio* originates from the Latin verb *mittere*, meaning “to send.” In the New Testament, this concept is rendered through the Koine Greek verbs ἀποστέλλω (*apostellō*) and πέμπω (*pempō*), both of which signify the act of sending someone with a particular purpose. Central to the Christian theological understanding of mission is the sending of the Son by the Father. As stated in the Fourth Gospel, “For God so loved (ἀγαπάω, *agapaō*) the world that God gave God’s only Son” (Jn 3:16), and “God did not send (*apostellō*) the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3:17).

During His public ministry, Jesus also commissioned His disciples, entrusting them with the mission to proclaim the Good News and heal the sick. This apostolic sending (Lk 9:2; Jn 20:21) culminated in the post-resurrection mandate: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). This Great Commission, far from being a momentary directive, constitutes the ongoing mission of the Church and of all baptized Christians.

The Second Vatican Council reaffirms this foundational identity in *Ad Gentes*: “The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, for it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she takes her origin, according to the plan of God the Father.”⁵ Mission is thus not a peripheral task, nor is it limited to clergy, religious, or specific ecclesial movements. It is the core identity and animating principle of the Church’s existence. The Church “exists in order to evangelize,” as Pope Paul VI affirmed in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, and this remains true for the Church in every cultural, social, and historical context.⁶

Evangelization must therefore be understood as the Church’s primary vocation. It is not an optional or periodic endeavor, confined to particular liturgical seasons or mission appeals. Rather, it is constitutive of the Church’s being. Without evangelization, the Church risks losing its identity, and Christians may forget their vocation as witnesses of the Risen Christ. The missionary dimension of the Church challenges every generation to discern the signs of the times and to proclaim the Gospel anew in changing contexts.

In contemporary times, this missionary call takes on renewed urgency, especially as the demographic center of Christianity continues to shift from the global North to the global South. This shift presents both opportunities and challenges for mission and evangelization, requiring new expressions of

⁵ Vatican II, Degree on the Church’s Mission Activity *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, AAS 57 (1965), no. 2.

⁶ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 14.

Christian witness that are inculturated, dialogical, and responsive to the lived realities of diverse communities. The missionary mandate, rooted in Scripture and tradition, compels the Church to be ever attentive to the world, proclaiming Christ with fidelity and creativity.

Missionary Disciples: From Jerusalem to the Ends of the Earth

From the earliest moments following the Ascension of Christ, the disciples exhibited a profound awareness of their missionary identity. Despite persecution and opposition, they remained resolute in their commitment to the mandate entrusted to them by the Risen Lord (Acts 1:8). In Jerusalem, the apostles boldly proclaimed the resurrection, beginning with Peter's Pentecost discourse, which marked the birth of the Church's public witness (Acts 2:14–36). Stephen, the first Christian martyr, engaged in theological confrontation with the religious authorities, ultimately laying down his life in witness to the Gospel (Acts 7:1–60).

The outbreak of persecution in Jerusalem became a catalyst for missionary expansion. Far from hindering the Church's growth, dispersion enabled the Gospel to spread across Judea and Samaria and eventually beyond (Acts 8:1–4). As the disciples journeyed outward, they continued to proclaim the Good News with increasing fervor. Each geographic shift marked a decisive step in the unfolding of salvation history and the fulfillment of Christ's universal command (Mt 28:19–20).

Among the earliest missionary figures, Philip stands out. His encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the queen of Ethiopia, illustrates the inclusive reach of the Gospel and its appeal beyond Jewish boundaries. As Philip interpreted the Isaiah scroll and administered baptism (Acts 8:26–40), this moment symbolically initiated the spread of Christianity to the African continent. Likewise, ecclesial tradition holds that the Apostle Thomas journeyed to Muziris (modern-day Kerala, India) around the year 52, establishing Christian communities along the Malabar Coast. This tradition is recorded in the *Acts of Thomas* and continues to be affirmed by the Syro-Malabar Church today.

Christianity's eastward expansion continued along ancient trade networks such as the Silk Road. Historical records mention Alopen, a missionary of the Church of the East, who arrived in Chang'an (modern Xi'an, China) in 635 AD, introducing the faith to the Tang dynasty. These early missions demonstrate that the Christian movement was not limited to the Roman Empire but took root in Asia and Africa from its inception.

This historical witness affirms a fundamental theological truth. That is, evangelization is not the sole responsibility of ordained clergy or religious congregations, but the vocation of all the baptized. As Pope Francis writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients.⁷

In light of this universal call, every Christian is summoned to become a missionary disciple, a bearer of Christ's light in a world longing for redemption. This vocation transcends cultural boundaries, personal vocations, or geographical borders. In today's globalized and pluralistic world, the missionary mandate assumes new forms. The dramatic demographic shift in Christianity from the global North to the global South has transformed the ecclesial landscape. Former missionary-receiving countries now send evangelizers to secularized and post-Christian societies in Europe, North America, and Australia/New Zealand. At the same time, migration, urbanization, and interreligious coexistence have given rise to new missionary contexts. These include "migrant missionary disciples," who, though themselves migrants and often subject to the complexities of displacement, cultural marginalization, and social instability, nonetheless bear witness to the Gospel through their lives and actions. Informed by their faith and shaped by the migratory experience, they engage in evangelization within transitory and intercultural contexts, serving as vital agents of dialogue, reconciliation, and hope across cultural and national boundaries.

Thus, the Church's missionary task remains as urgent and dynamic today as it was in apostolic times. Evangelization, rooted in the life of Christ, sustained by the Holy Spirit, and expressed in diverse historical and cultural forms, continues to animate the Church's identity. Every Christian, as commanded by Jesus Christ, the first missionary in salvation history, is invited to participate in the building of God's Kingdom both locally and globally.

The Land of Papua New Guinea

As previously indicated, in obedience to the mandate of Christ, missionaries from various religious congregations of different Christian churches began

⁷ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World *Evangelii Gaudium*, AAS 105 (2013), no. 120.

arriving in PNG in the nineteenth century. These missionary efforts introduced the Gospel to the peoples of the island, initiating profound religious and cultural transformations.

Historical Overview

Papua New Guinea bears enduring traces of successive colonial encounters with European and Asian powers, notably Germany, the Netherlands, Britain, and Japan. Each of these colonial regimes contributed to the formation of the nation's administrative structures, linguistic diversity, educational systems, and socio-cultural configurations. By the early twentieth century, the territory had become bifurcated; i.e., the northern region, known as German New Guinea, was under German control, while the southern region, Papua, was administered as a British colony.

During the Second World War, PNG assumed strategic significance in the Pacific theatre. Japanese military occupation of key regions led to intense conflict across the islands. In the aftermath of the war, administrative control of both territories was transferred to Australia, which governed until PNG attained independence on 16 September 1975. Upon independence, Papua New Guinea became a sovereign state, joined the Commonwealth of Nations, and adopted a parliamentary democratic system.

Despite the adoption of democratic governance led by a Prime Minister and a parliamentary structure, PNG's political and social realities remain deeply influenced by tribal affiliations and customary systems. With over 800 distinct languages and numerous ethnolinguistic groups, allegiance is often directed more toward kinship networks, such as clan, tribe, and province. This fragmentation underscores the complexity of forging a unified national identity.

The persistence of traditional culture and customary law has endowed PNG with a vibrant and resilient heritage. Kinship structures, local jurisprudence, and ancestral rituals continue to shape daily life across rural and urban contexts. Nevertheless, these same traditional frameworks pose ongoing challenges to national integration and governance. Achieving a balance between cultural preservation and national unity necessitates culturally responsive policies that promote inclusivity, honor indigenous traditions, and support sustainable development.

Agriculture and Cuisine

Papua New Guinea's cultural identity is deeply interwoven with its ecological environment and agricultural lifeways. Characterized by a tropical climate and fertile volcanic soil, PNG remains predominantly an agrarian

society. Subsistence farming serves as both an economic foundation and a cornerstone of social organization. Household gardens are widespread, supplying a variety of crops that include sweet potatoes/*kaukau*, maize, papaya, pineapple, tomatoes, leafy greens, and assorted fruits. These cultivation practices reflect not only the people's intimate relationship with the land but also the transmission of agricultural knowledge across generations.

In the Highlands, particularly in regions such as Jiwaka and Simbu, farmers construct terraced gardens on hillsides to manage erosion and optimize cultivation on steep terrain. Sweet potato is the principal staple in these areas. Conversely, in lowland and coastal regions such as Madang, sago/*saksak*, a starch derived from the sago palm, serves as a dietary staple. These diverse ecological adaptations underscore the ingenuity and environmental acumen of local communities.

One of the most distinctive culinary traditions in PNG is the *mumu* pig, an earth-oven cooking method used primarily for ceremonial and communal gatherings. In this practice, pork, root crops, and vegetables are slow-cooked in an underground pit lined with hot stones. Beyond its nutritional value, the pig holds considerable symbolic and economic significance. It functions as a medium of social exchange, a marker of status, and a core element in ritual life. In marriage customs, for instance, pigs are central to bride-price arrangements, with dowries often including several animals, the number determined by the social stature of the families involved. A contemporary example of this cultural practice was witnessed during the episcopal ordination of Coadjutor Archbishop Clement Papa in the Archdiocese of Mt. Hagen in 2024, when more than one hundred pigs were contributed by local parishes for the celebratory feast, an expression of communal generosity and enduring cultural tradition.

In addition to its agricultural and culinary distinctiveness, PNG is renowned for its rich cultural expressions, manifested through traditional attire, diverse languages, and traditional religious practices. These elements continue to define the nation's identity and reflect its complex tapestry of indigenous knowledge, belief systems, and artistic heritage.

Traditional Attire *Bilas*

Traditional attire in Papua New Guinea, commonly known as *bilas*, constitutes one of the most vivid and tangible expressions of cultural identity. Each tribe and region boasts a distinctive sartorial tradition, utilizing materials sourced from the local environment, including bird feathers, shells, seeds, plant fibers, and animal skins. Far from being merely decorative, *bilas* functions as a symbolic representation of social hierarchy, gender, age, and ceremonial roles within a given community.

Elaborate forms of *bilas* are prominently displayed during culturally significant events such as initiation rites, matrimonial ceremonies, funerals, and cultural festivals. These occasions serve as both communal celebrations and reaffirmations of tribal identity and solidarity. Noteworthy among such events are the Mt. Hagen Cultural Show (Western Highlands) and the Wabag Cultural Show (Enga Province), which attract participants and spectators from across the country. During these gatherings, traditional dances and songs are performed by individuals adorned in vibrant attire and body paint.

Face painting is executed with locally available materials, such as clay, charcoal, and mineral pigments, often in vivid hues of red, yellow, black, and white. Particularly revered are the elaborate headdresses fashioned from the plumage of the bird of paradise, a national symbol of Papua New Guinea. These headdresses transcend their aesthetic appeal. They carry symbolic meanings of vitality, beauty, and a profound spiritual connection to the natural world.

Linguistic Diversity

PNG is widely recognized as one of the most linguistically diverse nations on the planet, with over 800 indigenous languages spoken across its territory. This remarkable linguistic heterogeneity has given rise to a tri-lingual norm among many Papua New Guineans, who typically communicate in *Tok ples* (the vernacular or tribal language), *Tok Pisin* (a widely used language), and English (the official language employed in formal education, governance, and national media).

Tok Pisin plays a crucial role as a lingua franca, enabling communication among speakers of different tribal languages, particularly in public settings such as markets, hospitals, and schools. In urban centers such as Lae, it is common for parents to converse in *Tok ples* at home, while children are educated in English. Public interactions with members of other tribes often take place in *Tok Pisin*, thus illustrating the pragmatic and integrative role of these languages. While English and *Tok Pisin* contribute to national unity and cross-cultural communication, *Tok ples* remains a cherished emblem of local identity and community cohesion.

Traditional Religions

Each tribal group in PNG maintains a distinct and deeply rooted religious worldview, comprising beliefs, rituals, and spiritual practices intimately connected to their environment and ancestral lineage. These traditional religious systems are integral to the cultural fabric of the society, guiding ethical conduct, community relationships, and responses to life's major transitions.

Spiritual practices are often centered on the reverence of ancestral spirits, deities, or nature-based entities believed to exert influence over human affairs. Rituals associated with rites of passage, such as birth, initiation, marriage, and death, and seasonal celebrations are performed with communal participation and solemnity. These practices serve not only to seek divine favor but also to reinforce social cohesion and the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations.

An illustrative case is that of the Asaro people from Goroka in the Eastern Highlands, famed for their ceremonial use of clay masks. Known as the *Asaro Mudmen*, these masked figures originated from a local legend in which ancestral warriors used eerie clay masks to intimidate adversaries during a time of conflict. Today, the *Mudmen* serve as powerful cultural symbols of both spiritual resilience and creative expression, embodying the complex interplay of tradition, memory, and identity within PNG's indigenous religious landscape.

Missionary Opportunities

Opportunities for evangelization arise uniquely within every cultural landscape, particularly in mission territories where the Gospel has yet to be fully incarnated. In the context of PNG, a missionary, after engaging pastorally with local communities, may begin to identify specific avenues for meaningful proclamation. These opportunities become vital channels for embodying the mission of Jesus Christ in ways that are both effective and culturally resonant.

Papua New Guinean Contextual Theology

In an increasingly interconnected world, contextual theology assumes a pivotal role in facilitating the faithful's engagement with the Gospel in culturally diverse settings. Rather than merely transmitting theological content, the missionary is called to enter into a dynamic dialogue with local cultural expressions. Through this process, under the guidance of the Church, the message of Jesus Christ is communicated in a manner that is both faithful to the Gospel and meaningful to the people.

The celebration of the Last Supper, for instance, provides a useful lens through which to understand this integration. Within Jesus' own cultural context, the Passover meal was marked by significant elements such as bread and wine, staples of the Jewish diet. Though the Gospel accounts do not elaborate extensively on the physical details of the setting, historical and cultural scholarship allows us to envision Jesus and His disciples reclining together in accordance with Jewish tradition. Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper offers a

Renaissance interpretation of this moment, shaped by the artistic conventions and theological imagination of 15th-century Europe. Seated in Western attire at a long table, the figures reflect the cultural lens of da Vinci's milieu rather than that of first-century Palestine.

In contrast, the work of Moses Minipa, a contemporary Papua New Guinean artist, reinterprets the Last Supper through the visual and symbolic language of the PNG Highlands. In Minipa's depiction, Jesus is portrayed as a tribal leader from Jiwaka Province, and the apostles are adorned in traditional attire from various PNG tribes. Notably, Judas Iscariot, positioned fourth from Jesus' left, wears the distinctive dress of the Huli people, known for their acumen in trade and negotiation. The food displayed in Minipa's painting includes local produce such as sweet potatoes, sugarcane, bananas, and other familiar staples. Instead of the traditional bread and wine, Jesus is shown holding a sweet potato, a cultural dynamic equivalence to bread in Jewish custom or rice in Vietnamese culture, and a glass of water, a common and symbolic beverage in the region.

This artistic rendering is more than a creative expression. It is a theological statement. Following the trajectory set by the Second Vatican Council and supported by regional ecclesial bodies such as the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), the Church has encouraged the formation of authentically local models of ecclesial life. During his apostolic visit to Thailand in 2019, Pope Francis emphasized the importance of incarnating the Gospel in the "flesh and face" of local culture. He reminded the Church that evangelization must be rooted in the spiritual traditions, values, and symbols of the people, so that the message of Christ becomes truly incarnate in their experience.

In this light, Minipa's painting stands as a theological and pastoral act. It not only makes the Last Supper intelligible to PNG audiences but also deepens their spiritual identification with the Gospel. As such, it becomes a profound testimony to the transformative power of contextual theology in mission.

Language Acquisition and Cultural Exchange

Evangelization is not merely an act of proclamation, but also an invitation to communion through mutual understanding. For the missionary, this requires an intentional immersion into the linguistic and cultural world of the community being served. Language is more than a functional tool. It is a vessel of collective memory, identity, and spiritual depth. Through language, missionaries gain access to local expressions of suffering, hope, joy, and faith, often communicated in ways that transcend formal theological categories. Acquiring the local language serves not only to enhance communication but also

to demonstrate deep respect for the dignity and heritage of the people. It builds bridges of trust and lays the groundwork for authentic interpersonal relationships and communal engagement. Moreover, such linguistic sensitivity opens space for a more faithful and nuanced communication of the Gospel message.

Intercultural exchange is likewise an essential dimension of mission. In a world characterized by increasing cultural convergence, the missionary is both a bearer of the Gospel and a custodian of their own cultural identity. Through respectful dialogue, missionaries offer elements of their own heritage not as superior models but as invitations to mutual enrichment. True interculturality is marked not by assimilation, but by hospitality, allowing each culture to encounter the other on equal and respectful terms.

A notable example of this cultural exchange occurred in 2024 during the annual Talent Night at Good Shepherd Seminary, Banz, Jiwaka. The author presented a performance titled *The History of the Vietnamese Outfits*, delivered by PNG seminarians. Similarly, during the celebration of the Vietnamese Têt Eucharist, local seminarians offered culturally meaningful gifts accompanied by the Vietnamese hymn *A Hymn of Incense* by Dao Kim. These moments are not merely performative but represent concrete gestures of intercultural communion, mirroring the Incarnation, in which the Word became flesh and entered fully into a specific culture (John 1:14).

Conversely, missionaries themselves have participated in local expressions of faith and culture. In certain mission settings, clergy and religious have joined *singsings*,⁸ participated in tribal reconciliation rituals, or learned *Tok Ples* to better understand the religious imagination of the people. Such reciprocal openness reinforces the Church's universality while celebrating the uniqueness of each people. Through such mutual sharing, the Church becomes ever more universal and yet intimately local, capable of speaking to the heart of every culture while remaining faithful to the Gospel.

The Witness of Christian Life

A third significant opportunity in the context of PNG is the country's predominantly Christian identity. With the majority of the population baptized, the missionary may ask: What does it mean to proclaim the Gospel in a society that already identifies as Christian?

⁸ In the Papua New Guinean context, a *singsing* is a traditional cultural gathering involving dance, music, body decoration, and the performance of tribal identity and stories. Often held during festivals or ceremonies, *singsings* serve not only as expressions of cultural heritage but also as communal events that can carry spiritual and symbolic meaning.

This question reveals a deeper dimension of mission; i.e., the call to evangelize not only through proclamation but through the witness of life. While the initial act of evangelization may bring individuals to the font of baptism, the ongoing mission is one of continual conversion, personal, communal, and cultural. Evangelization in this context must engage the lived realities of the people, addressing the residual challenges of tribal conflict, ancestral beliefs, and the persistent influence of *Sanguma* (witchcraft).

To live as a witness is to embody the Gospel in daily life. It is to allow one's actions, words, and relationships to be permeated by the Spirit of Christ. In PNG, this entails a courageous commitment to forgiveness in the face of customary retaliation, a readiness to promote truth in a context marked by suspicion and fear, and a visible expression of Christian love in a society still navigating the tensions of modernity and tradition.

Furthermore, witnessing is not an individual endeavor but a communal calling. Parishes and Christian communities must become *loci* of renewal, living cells of the Body of Christ in which faith is not only professed but practiced. Here, the Christian life becomes a countercultural witness to solidarity, reconciliation, and human dignity.

Ultimately, the missionary is called to make the presence of Christ visible and tangible. Through a life marked by humility, compassion, service, and integrity, the Gospel is no longer merely proclaimed but embodied, heard not only through words, but encountered in lived experience. In this way, the Church fulfills its missionary identity, allowing the Good News to take root in the soil of Papua New Guinea and bear fruit that endures.

Missionary Challenges

The Church's mission of evangelization in PNG commenced in the 19th century. Through the zeal, perseverance, and sacrificial dedication of foreign missionaries, the church in PNG has grown substantially, establishing 19 dioceses, producing one cardinal and numerous bishops, priests, and religious men and women. Furthermore, the Church has contributed significantly to the development of educational and healthcare systems and, most importantly, has sown the seeds of Christian faith among tribal communities that traditionally adhered to distinct indigenous belief systems. Today, Catholics constitute approximately 30% of the national population of around 8 million.

As the fruits of the Christian faith continue to take root across the country, the local clergy and religious are increasingly assuming leadership within the life of the PNG church. Nevertheless, as with many Christian communities

worldwide, the evangelizing mission in PNG is confronted with complex challenges shaped by its unique cultural landscape and the broader dynamics of an evolving global context.

Paradigm Shift from Global North to Global South

Stephen Bevans observes that “since the end of the twentieth century, the ‘center of gravity’ of Christianity has shifted from...Europe, North America, and Australia/New Zealand to the world of [Africa, South American, Asia and Oceania].”⁹ Likewise, Tonia Pernia states, “Cardinal Bergoglio’s election puts a new face to the Catholic Church, i.e., a Church that is no longer a European Church, but a truly global Church. It also reflects the so-called ‘demographic shift’ of the Catholic Church, i.e., the Catholic Church’s population shift from the global North to the global South (that is, Latin America, Africa, Asia), where about two-thirds of the 1.2 billion Catholics now live. In fact, almost 50% of all Catholics live in Latin America alone.”¹⁰ Consequently, the Church in Papua New Guinea finds itself within a broader ecclesial transition marked by the shifting center of gravity in Christianity from the global North to the global South. Once regarded as a “mission territory” evangelized by foreign missionaries, PNG is now called to embrace its new identity, as a missionary church capable of sending forth evangelizers, including to the very countries that once sent missionaries to its shores.

This shift is not merely geographic or demographic but signals a profound theological and pastoral conversion in missionary consciousness. The local Church can no longer remain dependent upon foreign congregations or international organizations. Instead, it is imperative that local clergy, religious, and lay faithful take active responsibility for deepening their understanding of Sacred Scripture, the Catechism, Church teachings, and pastoral practice. Such formation is essential if they are to become authentic witnesses and agents of the Gospel in both local and cross-cultural contexts.

To be a missionary church entails both receiving and giving. Even the smallest and poorest communities, whether a remote diocese in the mountains or a modest village parish, can serve as vital sources of missionary dynamism, contributing vocations, pastoral initiatives, and Christian witness. As *Evangelii Gaudium* asserts, every baptized person is a missionary regardless of geographical location.¹¹

⁹ Stephen B. Bevans, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2009), 5.

¹⁰ Antonio Pernia, *Paradigm Shift in the Catholic Church* (Class Lecture, Tagaytay: Divine Word Institute of Mission Studies, 2019).

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 120.

Fulfilling this mission requires intentional investment in human formation, particularly among the youth. This includes not only theological and pastoral education but also the cultivation of human maturity, spiritual depth, intercultural competence, and the courage to leave behind comfort zones for the sake of the Gospel. Seminarians and future pastoral leaders must be spiritually grounded, intellectually equipped, pastorally competent, and mission-ready, even to evangelize contexts where Christianity is now in decline.

Tribal Conflict and the Challenge of Forgiveness

A profound obstacle to the Christian mission in PNG is the entrenched culture of violence and retaliation. The principle of *lex talionis*, “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”, functions within many tribal communities as a means of preserving communal honor and safeguarding group cohesion. Failure to retaliate when harmed is often interpreted as weakness, leading to societal shame. Consequently, cycles of violence persist, fostering deep social fragmentation and trauma.

In such a cultural milieu, the Christian call to forgive, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44), poses a radical challenge. The Gospel message directly contests traditional conceptions of justice and communal dignity. Thus, missionary proclamation must go beyond rhetoric. It requires lived witness, authenticity, and profound pastoral sensitivity.

The province of Enga, formerly renowned for its numerous religious vocations, has in recent years become a locus of violent conflict. Tribal warfare has resulted in the temporary closure of parishes, evacuation of seminaries, and the disruption of pastoral programs. Churches have been burned, entire villages displaced, and ecclesial life severely strained. These are not merely material losses but deep spiritual wounds inflicted upon the Body of Christ in PNG.

In such volatile conditions, missionaries are called to become beacons of reconciliation and instruments of peace. They must accompany suffering communities, choosing to remain amid conflict rather than retreating to safety. Through acts of presence, solidarity, and pastoral care, sharing in the hardships of the people, offering hospitality, and mediating dialogue, missionaries embody the merciful love of Christ and help lay the groundwork for enduring peace.

Evangelizing in a culture shaped by retaliatory justice thus constitutes not only an external mission but also a profound interior struggle. It demands a life deeply rooted in prayer, sacramental grace, and the support of the ecclesial community. Moreover, the task of promoting peace cannot rest solely on individual missionaries or Church leaders. It necessitates collaborative efforts

among the Church, state authorities, educational institutions, civil society, and traditional leaders.

Key to long-term transformation is the integration of peace-building values, reconciliation, restorative justice, and nonviolent conflict resolution, into educational curricula and community life. By equipping young people with the tools for peaceful dialogue and critical thinking, the Church can contribute to breaking cycles of revenge and nurturing a culture of peace.

In his testimony for the canonization of Blessed Peter ToRot, Fr. Thomas Patrick, a priest of the Diocese of Wabag (Enga Province), recounted a profound personal experience in which he turned to faith to help mediate a violent tribal conflict between his own community and a rival tribe. In his twenties at the time, he approached the frontlines of the conflict bearing four potent symbols of Christian witness: a cross tied around his waist, a *bilum* containing soil and water from the grave of Blessed Peter ToRot, and a Bible. With courage and conviction, he addressed members of the opposing tribe, invoking the words of Matthew 5:44, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” as a plea for peace and reconciliation.¹²

If the Gospel is indeed the light that dispels darkness, then in regions scarred by violence and division, the missionary is called to be a steady, unyielding flame, a living testimony to the crucified and forgiving Christ whose love alone can heal and renew the human heart.

***Sanguma*: Witchcraft and the Challenge of Evangelization**

While the Catholic Church in PNG continues to experience growth in faith and mission, one of the most persistent and complex challenges remains the widespread belief in *sanguma*, a term encompassing witchcraft, sorcery, black magic, and other occult practices. Despite the formal acceptance of Christianity through baptism, many faithful still hold onto traditional cosmologies, including belief in malevolent spiritual forces, ancestral curses, and supernatural causes of misfortune. These enduring beliefs serve not only as vestiges of indigenous religion but also as coping mechanisms in a society shaped by chronic insecurity, economic hardship, and limited access to healthcare and education.

In rural and isolated communities, where scientific explanations and professional medical care are scarce, unexplained deaths, diseases, or personal misfortunes are frequently attributed to *sanguma*. Those suspected of engaging

¹² Thomas Patrick, *A Testimony to Blessed Peter ToRot* (Banz, Jiwaka Province: Good Shepherd Seminary, 2024).

in such practices, often marginalized individuals such as widows, orphans, or people displaying atypical behavior, become scapegoats for communal fear. Accusations are commonly made without due process, leading to ostracism, physical violence, forced exile, or even extrajudicial killings. These acts represent profound violations of human dignity and constitute an urgent pastoral concern.

For the missionary community, this reality presents a dual challenge. First, there is the evangelical imperative to proclaim the truth of the Gospel, that God is the author of life and hope, not a source of fear or destruction. Second, there is the need for deep pastoral sensitivity in addressing a spiritual worldview that is both complex and fragile. Simply preaching doctrinal truths is insufficient. Missionaries are called to walk with the people, serve as advocates for the vulnerable, and help communities discern between fear-driven superstition and the liberating message of Christ. In this light, Tuan Viet Cao emphasizes that during times of illness, pastoral missionaries should offer compassionate support through visits, prayer, and spiritual guidance, helping the sick prepare for death, consoling families, and encouraging trust in God and the Risen Lord rather than reliance on sorcery.¹³

In this context, effective missionary engagement demands not only theological formation but also a basic understanding of psychology, anthropology, and public health. Proactive efforts such as organizing educational workshops on health and disease, training in psychological resilience, and promoting critical thinking are indispensable. These initiatives are not ancillary to evangelization but rather integral expressions of the Gospel's transformative power.

Missionaries in areas affected by *sanguma*-related violence often face significant personal risk, including threats to their lives. Nevertheless, it is precisely in these crucibles of fear and misunderstanding that the Gospel's light shines most brightly. By entering spaces where many believe God is absent, missionaries bear witness to a God who is especially present among the afflicted, the misunderstood, and the outcast.

Thus, missionary work in the context of *sanguma* is a journey that requires discernment, intercultural dialogue, and the courage to challenge destructive cultural norms with the light of the Gospel. It is a witness to Christ who liberates humanity not only from sin but also from fear, superstition, and social exclusion.

¹³ Tuan Viet Cao, "Sorcery and Witchcraft: A Critical Challenge in Papua New Guinea," *Religion and Social Communication* 22, no. 2 (2024): 434.

The Global Network: Digital Media and Cultural Displacement

Contemporary Papua New Guinea finds itself amid a rapidly transforming sociocultural landscape, where the traditional communal fabric is increasingly shaped, and in some cases undermined, by the pervasive influence of digital media. Among the most pressing challenges is the silent incursion of globalized communication networks, particularly through smartphones and social media platforms such as Facebook. While these technologies offer clear benefits, improved access to information, greater connectivity, and new avenues for evangelization, they also expose users, especially youth, to ideologies rooted in individualism, consumerism, and secularism, many of which stand in tension with both indigenous values and the Christian worldview.

This digital influence has contributed to a gradual erosion of traditional virtues such as simplicity, solidarity, and respect for communal authority. Young people, increasingly immersed in digital content, often adopt foreign lifestyles and aspirations detached from their cultural and social realities. This disconnection results in identity disorientation that can extend to religious life, weakening the rootedness and coherence of their faith. Without a strong cultural grounding, faith risks becoming superficial, privatized, or fragmented.

Responding to these phenomena requires proactive and culturally sensitive strategies. Hence, the Church in PNG, particularly its missionaries and pastoral leaders, must play a leading role in media literacy, cultural formation, and moral discernment. This involves equipping young people with critical tools to navigate digital content responsibly, creating programs that reconnect them with their heritage, and fostering a holistic integration of Christian faith into everyday life. Moreover, missionaries themselves must be both culturally competent and digitally literate, capable of using media effectively for evangelization while helping communities evaluate and resist harmful cultural imports.

Ultimately, the Church's mission in the digital era is not to reject modernity, but to transform it, "baptizing" new forms of communication so they become instruments of communion, truth, and peace. In doing so, the missionaries in Papua New Guinea can guide their people, especially the youth, to embrace their faith with depth and authenticity, rooted in cultural identity yet open to the universal message of the Gospel.

The Pastoral Model: Listening – Accompaniment – Transformation – Hope

As previously discussed, the mission of evangelization in PNG is confronted with complex pastoral, cultural, and social challenges. Therefore,

evangelization cannot be limited to the sacramental life or catechetical instruction alone. Rather, it must be deeply rooted in the concrete realities of human existence. In the words of Pope Francis, missionaries must be willing to “smell like the sheep,” embracing the full spectrum of people’s lived experience. In this context, an effective missionary approach must be grounded in four interconnected pillars: listening, accompaniment, transformation, and hope.

Listening to reality and the inner voice of the people

Genuine evangelization begins not with prepackaged programs or imposed frameworks, but with the humble act of listening, an attentive, reverent openness to the voice of the people and the movement of God within their history and culture. Evangelization in PNG must not be conceived as a one-sided transmission of the Gospel, as though the presence of God were previously absent. Rather, it is a dialogical pilgrimage that recognizes the prior activity of God in the lives of the people, their traditional religions, and their socio-cultural narratives.

This first stage entails a deep listening to both the historical memory and present concerns of the people: the legacies of tribal life, rich cultural symbols, and the growing pains of a society in transition. Of particular importance is the silent suffering carried within many hearts, arising from poverty, intergenerational violence, political instability, and socio-economic inequities. Such suffering often gives rise to existential questions about justice, identity, and the meaning of life in light of both traditional beliefs and Christian hope.

These dimensions of life are not adequately understood through statistics or formal reports. They can only be grasped through the incarnational presence of the missionary, by dwelling among the people, walking with them in daily struggles, and cultivating relationships of trust. Missionaries are thus called to be companions rather than instructors, fellow pilgrims rather than distant authorities. Their task is to listen as one listens to a sacred story, with compassion, attentiveness, and maternal tenderness.

In such listening, the voice of God is often discerned not in dramatic manifestations, but in the fragile, whispered pain of the marginalized: the wounded, the forgotten, the displaced. It is through this compassionate attentiveness that evangelization becomes an act of salvific dialogue, wherein the Gospel is received not as a foreign imposition, but as a seed that takes root in the Niugini Garden, in the soil of local culture and experience.

Accompanying with patience and a spirit of service

Following the act of listening, the next pastoral movement is that of accompaniment. To accompany is not merely to be physically present but to adopt a posture of solidarity and shared humanity. It is to “walk with” rather than “walk ahead of,” echoing the mystery of the Incarnation, where the Word became flesh and pitched His tent among us (Jn 1:14). Authentic accompaniment is not sentimental or superficial. It involves sustained engagement through concrete acts of service. These may include initiating educational programs, catechetical formation, youth outreach, and peacemaking in contexts of tribal conflict. Through these actions, the Gospel assumes flesh and blood, becoming tangible, credible, and life-giving.

A compelling example is the *Children’s Pastoral Program* led by Fr. Thomas W. Patrick. This initiative addresses not only faith formation but also offers social, emotional, and spiritual support to children, particularly those who are orphaned, disabled, marginalized, or from other religious backgrounds. The program’s catechists engage children through basic catechism, moral education, liturgical music, prayer, and various pastoral activities. Such initiatives provide a valuable model of accompaniment that other missionaries may emulate or support.

Accompaniment, when practiced with patience and humility, becomes a sign of radical service, an embodiment of Christ’s self-giving love. In the face of cultural misunderstanding, resistance, or even violence, the persevering presence of the missionary becomes a living testimony to God’s unwavering fidelity. The Church in PNG is thereby transformed into a leaven in the dough and a beacon of light, bearing witness to the kingdom of God through the quiet, persistent love of those who choose to stay.

Transformation through the Gospel

The pastoral journey must ultimately lead toward transformation, not merely external or behavioral change, but an inward conversion of heart, community, and society in light of the Gospel. Such transformation, however, is neither imposed nor abrupt. It is the fruit of long-term commitment, loving accompaniment, and spiritual discernment. At the heart of this transformation lies the respectful dialogue between the Gospel and the cultural identity of the people. Culture is the context in which individuals come to know themselves, relate to others, and encounter God. As articulated in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Gospel does not reject culture but seeks to purify, elevate, and fulfill its deepest aspirations.

This pastoral principle is essential in the context of PNG, where traditional customs coexist with Christian values in both harmony and tension.¹⁴ One significant area for cultural conversion is the persistence of *sanguma*, the belief in and practice of sorcery and witchcraft. While rooted in traditional cosmology, *sanguma* has often become a vehicle for fear, violence, and scapegoating, particularly targeting vulnerable individuals such as widows or outsiders. The Gospel stands in radical opposition to such dehumanization. It affirms the sacredness of each person, proclaims freedom from fear, and calls for communities of forgiveness and healing. The transformative power of the Gospel lies precisely in its ability to unmask falsehoods, dispel fear, and nurture social structures rooted in dignity and justice.

True transformation also entails the building of communities modeled after the values of Christ, places where women and children are respected, where tribal divisions are healed, and where forgiveness, solidarity, and service are practiced as daily virtues. Evangelization must be holistic: addressing not only the soul but the social, moral, and communal dimensions of life. The Risen Christ invites all to journey together toward a shared future, where wounds are healed, and hope becomes the new language of existence.

Hope in the sacred garden

Just as Jesus, the first missionary in salvation history, proclaimed God's redemptive love with hope, so too is hope at the heart of every authentic missionary vocation. This hope is not a vague optimism, but a theological virtue rooted in the Resurrection of Christ and the unwavering promise of God's saving love. It is this hope that sustains the missionary through the long, often difficult journey of evangelization. As a spiritual force, hope empowers missionaries to remain steadfast amid discouragement, resistance, or apparent failure, trusting in the transformative power of divine love at work in the world.

In PNG, the missionary is called to embody this hope; i.e., to walk alongside wounded communities with tenderness, to dispel darkness with the light of the Gospel, and to proclaim the possibility of transformation. As the missionary accompanies the people, he or she becomes a living sacrament of God's presence, calling all to new life, deeper communion, and a shared future in Christ.

In light of this hope, after nearly three years of missionary engagement in PNG, the author continues to encounter a sense of cultural unfamiliarity and

¹⁴ Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, AAS 58 (1966), no. 44.

contrast. The initial experiences with the country's unique rhythms of life, rugged terrain, and complex socio-cultural norms have demanded ongoing adaptation and deep reflection. For example, navigating poorly maintained roads, riddled with potholes and flanked by pedestrians, has proven not only challenging but also hazardous. Traffic incidents are common, particularly when children play near roadways or intoxicated individuals wander into the path of vehicles. In such contexts, local interpretations of justice often reflect a principle akin to *lex talionis*, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," with communal intervention sometimes occurring immediately at the scene of an accident.

Similarly, the unpredictability of air travel poses a recurring challenge. Like many locals, the author has endured long, uncertain days at airports, often without clear information regarding flight departures. On several occasions, flights were cancelled without explanation, highlighting the infrastructural limitations and systemic unpredictability that shape daily life in PNG.

Further complicating the situation are frequent power outages, which disrupt water supplies, hygiene routines, and access to communication technologies. These interruptions are particularly consequential in educational and missionary settings, where continuity and stability are essential for effective formation and ministry. Thus, life in PNG demands not only technical resourcefulness but also profound resilience, adaptability, and a spirit of service.

Despite these hardships, the author describes a gradual and grace-filled immersion into what he terms the "Sacred Garden," a metaphor for the spiritual and cultural richness of the people of Papua New Guinea. Like Moses before the burning bush, the missionary must also approach the people and their culture with reverence, humility, and openness. This journey necessitates a re-learning of basic human experiences: local languages, culinary practices, social customs, and relational dynamics. The phrase "*Mi mas lainim kaikai kaokao*/I must learn to eat sweet potatoes" has come to symbolize this self-emptying, an embrace of a worldview rooted in local wisdom and daily life.

Such a process of inculturation involves relinquishing preconceived notions and inherited cultural frameworks in order to see the world anew, through the eyes of the people. Mission is thus not merely the act of proclamation but a witness of life: marked by inclusion, mutual respect, and a shared humanity. In navigating these cultural and existential differences, the author has come to understand mission as fundamentally dialogical: an encounter that invites mutual learning, growth, and communion.

This transformative journey is not unfamiliar to the author. Having "migrated" as a Vietnamese refugee, first from Vietnam to Malaysia in 1982, then

to the Philippines in 1983, and finally to the United States in 1984, he vividly recalls the disorientation and gradual assimilation that accompanied life in San Jose, California. Adapting to a new linguistic, culinary, and social landscape in the United States, he was sustained by the enduring hope that, through grace and perseverance, he would find his place in a richly diverse society.

It was this same hope that inspired his vocational response to join the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) in 1997, committing his life to serve those on the margins. Leaving behind the familiarity of San Jose, California, he followed this call to Chicago, Illinois, where a new chapter of faith and mission unfolded.

Just as Abraham believed in God's promise and became the spiritual father of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, so too did St. Arnold Janssen, founder of the SVD, nurture a bold hope, to send missionaries to China in obedience to the evangelizing mandate of Christ. Today, the Society of the Divine Word joyfully prepares to celebrate its 150th Foundation Day on September 8, 2025. Aligned with this celebration, the universal Church enters Jubilee Year 2025 with the theme "Pilgrims of Hope," a fitting reminder of the Church's missionary and pilgrim identity, as proclaimed in *Ad Gentes*, "The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature."¹⁵

Rekindled by Abrahamic hope, Arnoldus hope, and *spes Ecclesiae*, a hope that sustains through trials, sees beyond daily hardship, and trusts in the quiet blossoming of the Gospel, the author continues his journey. Empowered by this theological hope, he walks his missionary pilgrimage in the Sacred Garden of Papua New Guinea, where faith takes root in the richness of local cultures and the Spirit continues to renew the face of the earth.

Conclusion

Missionary work in Papua New Guinea reveals a complex interplay of challenges and opportunities, shaped by the nation's cultural diversity and the broader dynamics of globalization. This reflection has underscored that the Church's identity as a missionary and pilgrim people demands a renewed commitment to proclaiming the Gospel in ways that are both faithful to Christ and responsive to local contexts.

The missionary is called to imitate the heart of Christ, marked by humility, incarnational presence, and loving accompaniment. Such a mission requires deep cultural sensitivity and spiritual discernment, affirming the intrinsic value

¹⁵ Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, no. 2

of local traditions while also proclaiming the transformative power of the Gospel. Evangelization, then, is not experienced as an imposition but as a seed sown into the fertile soil of PNG's spiritual and cultural landscape.

Nurtured by authentic witness, patient dialogue, and consistent pastoral presence, this seed can flourish, bearing fruit for local communities and the universal Church. As the Church journeys into the Jubilee Year 2025 as "Pilgrims of Hope," the mission in Papua New Guinea offers a compelling testimony to how faith can flourish when the Gospel is proclaimed with courage, compassion, and enduring hope.

“About Whom, May I Ask You?” (Acts 8:34): Isaiah’s Servant Songs in Luke-Acts

vănThanh Nguyễn, SVD

The question asked by the Ethiopian Eunuch to Philip in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 8:34) is continually probed by scholars, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?”¹ This simple question raises various issues. Do all four Isaiah’s Servant Songs refer to the same servant figure? If so, is it Israel? Is it a king (Cyrus perhaps)? Is it the prophet? Is it an historical individual or possibly an ideal person still to come, like a future Messiah? A definitive answer to the servant’s identification has not been reached.

This essay examines the four servant songs of Isaiah and the possible identity of the servant. While the servant’s identity is still a mystery to many biblical scholars, for Luke, Jesus of Nazareth is that messianic figure whose life and mission, especially his death, fulfill the messianic expectation described in the four servant songs of Isaiah. The question is: Was this aspect of servant Christology derived from Jesus’ self-understanding or was it introduced later by the early Christians, possibly by Luke, to make sense of Jesus’ tragic death? Before addressing this crucial question, it is necessary to briefly examine the content of the four servant songs.

¹ The passage that the eunuch is reading comes from Isaiah 53:7-8, which is part of the fourth Servant Song of Isaiah.

The Servant Songs of Isaiah

The four servant songs (Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13—53:12) were first isolated from the rest of Isaiah (chaps. 40-55) by the German scholar Bernard Duhm in the late nineteenth century.² The publication of his commentary, *Das Buch Jesaia*, in 1892 has had profound influence on Isaiah scholarship.³ According to Duhm, each of these songs deals with a mysterious figure known as God's servant whose character and mission distinguish him from other servants in Isaiah 40-55.

The expression "servant of Yahweh" (Heb, *'ebed yhw*), which is best translated as "servant of GOD,"⁴ is frequently found in the Old Testament as an honorable title attributed to prominent individuals, kings and prophets.⁵ They are called servants of GOD because they have obediently and faithfully accomplished the tasks entrusted to them. The title servant of GOD is a prominent concept in Isaiah 40-55. The word "servant" (*'ebed*) appears twenty-one times in these chapters of Isaiah (41:8, 9; 42:1, 19 [twice]; 43:10; 44:1, 2, 21 [twice], 26; 45:4; 48:20; 49:3, 5, 6, 7; 50:10; 52:13; 53:11; 54:17). The identity of the servants varies at different times. Sometimes the reference applies to Israel as the servant of GOD; at other times, the servant is identified as the prophet himself or even a gentile king (perhaps Cyrus, the king of Persia). In the case of the so-called Servant Songs (for example in 42:1; 49:3, 5, 6; 52:13; and 53:11), the identity of the figure is far from obvious.

First Song (Isa 42:1-4)

The first song begins with a solemn presentation of the servant. The servant is introduced by God as "my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him" (42:1a). The description

² The classification of these isolated texts as "songs" is really a misnomer, for these passages are more correctly identified by form critics as "poems," "speeches," or "oracles." For the sake of convenience and consistency, I will continue to call these passages "songs."

³ For a history of interpretation since Bernard Duhm, see the first part of Christopher R. North, *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah: An Historical and Critical Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 1-116.

⁴ Throughout this article, the title "GOD" (in caps) will be used to represent the divine name of YHWH. The purpose is to avoid using the sacred Hebrew name of GOD. To be more inclusive, the title "GOD" is used rather than the usual title "LORD." All Scripture citations are taken from the NRSV unless noted otherwise. For a study on the Servant of the LORD, see vanThanh Nguyễn, "Siervo de Yavé," in *Pasión de Jesucristo*, ed. Luis Diez Merino, Robin Ryan, and Adolfo Lippi (Madrid: San Pablo, 2015) 1201-1211.

⁵ For a list of individuals who are called "servant of GOD" in the OT, see Walther Zimmerli and Joachim Jeremias, "Pais theou," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 4:663-666.

demonstrates God's love and affection for the servant. The servant has been uniquely chosen and given spiritual empowerment. In him, God finds joy and delight. Once the servant has been rightfully introduced, the speaker, who is identified as God, reveals the servant's mission. The servant's primary task is to bring forth or establish justice (*mispat*) for the nations.⁶ He will not fail or be discouraged until it is fully achieved on earth.

The manner in which the servant will carry out his mission is clearly depicted. First, the servant will conduct his task in a quiet and unpretentious way, for "He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street" (v. 2). Second, the servant will act with gentleness, careful not to harm the weakest of persons or things. The servant's tenderness is demonstrated by means of two metaphors: "a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench" (v. 3a). Third, the servant will patiently endure in his mission by not growing faint or being crushed "until he has established justice in the earth" (v. 4a). The description of perseverance in times of trial indicates that the servant will undergo personal suffering.

While the manner of the servant is modestly depicted, his character and role in this song connote hints of royalty. He is commissioned to "bring forth or establish justice to the nations." The task, at least, can be kingly. Furthermore, according to some commentators, verses 5-7, which are part of the first servant song, might refer to Cyrus, the Persian king who freed the exiled Jews and therefore fits the description of the one who will be a "light for the nations" (v. 6b), open the eyes of the blind and liberate prisoners from the dungeon (v. 7). Since Cyrus seems to be the subject of 41:25, which is situated only a few verses before the first servant song, the Persian king is a possible candidate. However, there are scholars who find it difficult to equate the mighty character of Cyrus with the humble servant of 42:1-4.⁷ The description of the character of Cyrus in its immediate context is often majestic and all powerful, one who will "trample on rulers as on mortar, as the potter treads clay" (41:25b; see also 41:2, 45:1-4). In contrast, the portrait of the servant is of an unassuming and gentle figure, who will not raise his voice nor even break a bruised reed or quench a dimly burning wick (42:2, 3). The identity of this figure could be Israel or Judah⁸ who is called, "my servant" in the preceding passage (41:8, 9), but it could also be the prophet whom God has chosen and endowed with

⁶ For a variety of possible meanings of *mispat*, see F. Duane Lindsey, *The Servant Songs: A Study in Isaiah* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 43-45.

⁷ Peter Wilcox and David Paton-Williams, "The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah," *Journal of the Study of the Old Testament* 42 (1988): 86. See also Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55* (Anchor Bible 19A; New York: Doubleday, 2002), 300.

⁸ Hoppe (*Isaiah*, 112) suggests that the servant is Judah fulfilling its destiny as the light to the nations.

his Spirit. The identity of the servant however remains ambiguous but perhaps shall be made clearer in the second servant song.

Second Song (Isa 49:1-6)

Unlike the first servant song, in which God is the speaker, the servant himself is the speaker in the second servant song.⁹ The first section of the song (vv. 1-4) describes what the servant does. The servant addresses his message to all the nations who are living near and far, implying, perhaps, the whole human race. He pleads for their attention to listen to what he is about to say. Called by God while he was still in his mother's womb (v. 1b; cf. Jer 1:5), he has been equipped with a unique gift and capacity to deliver God's message. Even though God graciously assured him that he is the servant in whom God will be glorified (v. 3), the servant nevertheless laments the failure of his labor (v. 4a); yet he still has confidence in God's vindication and recompense (v. 4b). The second section of the song (vv. 5 and 6) describes the servant's two-fold mission and task. The servant's primary mission is to Israel, God's chosen people, for whom the servant has been commissioned since he was formed in his mother's womb (v. 5a). In this mission, he was to bring Israel (also known as Jacob) back and to gather them to God.¹⁰ The servant's efforts to call Israel to repentance and to spiritual renewal seemed to have been in vain as alluded to in verse 4. Nevertheless, his effort has not gone unnoticed in the sight of God (v. 5b). His disappointment in the mission to Israel is assuaged by God as "too light a thing" or "trifling" (v. 6a) in comparison to God's great plan. In the form of direct speech, God re-commissioned the servant to expand his mission saying, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (v. 6b). Thus, the servant's mission is now universal.¹¹ He is to be "a light to the nations" and to bring "salvation" to the ends of the earth.

Although the opening section unveils the identity of GOD's servant as "Israel" (49:3), some scholars question this association and even suspect the word "Israel" is a later interpolation.¹² While verse 3 explicitly identified the servant as Israel, we are told in verse 5 that the servant was given a mission to

⁹ Isaiah 49:1-6 contains several forms of speech. It might be described as a poem and/or an autobiographical narrative and/or a testimony, but definitely not a song. See John Goldingay and David Payne, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 40-55* (Vol. II; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 155.

¹⁰ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, 301.

¹¹ Robert Ellis, "The Remarkable Suffering Servant of Isaiah 40-55," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 34 (1991), 22.

¹² Lindsey, *Servant Songs*, 65.

Israel. Obviously, there is a contradiction here, for Israel cannot have a mission to itself. So, who really is the servant if the servant is not Israel? The best solution is to interpret the whole song, including the controversial identification in 49:3, as a reference to the prophet himself.¹³

Third Song (Isa 50:4-9)

As in the second song, the servant speaks in the first-person singular. This rare self-referential discourse, or more exactly monologue, is a reflection on the nature of his vocation and the mission for which the Lord GOD (or “*Yahweh Adonai*,” appearing four times in 50:4, 5, 7, 9) has commissioned him. The song can be divided into two parts. The first part of the song (vv. 4-7) focuses on his confidence in God’s assistance at times of suffering and affliction. The servant describes himself as one who has been given “the tongue of a teacher” (some commentators have “the tongue of disciples”), which means someone who repeats faithfully what has been learned. God has opened his ear so that he might listen to God’s words and has given him a well-trained tongue to comfort the weary. As a good disciple, the servant has learned to accept suffering and affliction without complaint or retaliation. He gives his back to those who strike him and his cheeks to those who pluck his beard (v. 6). He does not even try to escape from the insulting spittle, but rather quietly accepts the insults and shame (v. 7). How is the servant able to endure such humiliation and affliction? The servant reveals that it is the Lord GOD who actually strengthens him in his suffering and preserves him in his disgrace. The second part of the song (vv. 8-9) expresses the servant’s confidence that the Lord GOD will vindicate him and justify him in the face of his enemies. Confident of God’s help and vindication, the servant defiantly declares: “Who will contend with me?” “Who are my adversaries?” “Who will declare me guilty?” The servant is confident that he will be vindicated by God and will be declared innocent.¹⁴

The third song contains no reference to the term servant (*‘ebed*). Nevertheless, its status as a servant song is not in question because of the dominant theme of suffering that is directly related to the other servant songs. As a committed student, the servant obediently listens to God’s words and then speaks words of comfort to the weary. Since the Lord GOD stands by his side to assist him in his suffering, the servant is able to patiently endure without resistance and is filled with confidence to declare that the Lord GOD will vindicate his innocence in the sight of his enemies. The personal language and the detailed

¹³ Wilcox and Paton-Williams, “Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah,” 91. See also Goldingay and Payne, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 157-58.

¹⁴ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, 321.

description in the first-person singular do not seem to apply to Israel but rather to the prophet as the suffering servant of God.

Fourth Song (Isa 52:13—53:12)

The fourth servant song, which is the longest of the four servant passages and one of the most studied texts in the Old Testament,¹⁵ can be divided into three units.¹⁶ Encapsulated by two short speeches in which God is the speaker (52:13-15 and 53:11b-12), the middle section is spoken by an anonymous “we” (53:1-11a). The first speech (52:13-15) opens with words that echo the first servant song: “Behold, my servant” (cf. 42:1). In this divine presentation, God assures that the servant’s mission will be accomplished and exalted. Despite his terribly disfigured appearance, by which many nations will be startled (53:15), the suffering servant shall be glorious and exalted.

The speaker and the theme of the central section of this song (53:1-11a) are noticeably different than in the other two. The repetition of the “we” throughout the section indicates a new speaker(s), who represents a collective whole. The focus is not on the servant’s exaltation but on his humiliation and suffering. There is no “form or majesty” in his appearance (v. 2). His unattractiveness and misery caused many to despise and reject him (53:3). His affliction and infirmity were thought by all (even by the speakers) to be a punishment of God (v. 4). However, those who had once despised the servant came to the shocking realization that the servant did not suffer because of his own sins. Rather, it is for their iniquities that he was injured, and it was through his affliction that they are healed (vv. 4-5).

There is a unique element found only in this song. The servant suffers not just innocently but vicariously for others. His suffering actually has the power to atone for “the iniquity of us all” (v. 6). The manner in which the servant endured his suffering reflects the descriptions of the character found in the other songs. The servant suffered silently and submissively “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent” (v. 7).¹⁷ The speakers also make reference to the servant’s “grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich” (v. 9). Some scholars take this as an indication that the

¹⁵ See Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, eds., *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources* (Trans. Daniel P. Bailey; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

¹⁶ For a detailed study of the concentric structure with the theme of exodus and new exodus as its center, see Anthony R. Ceresko, “The Rhetorical Strategy of the Fourth Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13-53:12): Poetry and the Exodus-New Exodus,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56 (1994): 42-55. For an alternative chiasmic structure, see Goldingay and Payne, 275-77.

¹⁷ For a study on the theme of exodus and new exodus found in the fourth servant song, see Ceresko, “Rhetorical Strategy,” 47-50.

servant had already died or at least his death was imminent. Whatever the case might be, a humiliating death, one he was willing to die for others, is foreseen. The fourth song concludes with GOD as the speaker (53:11b-12). Similar to the opening speech, GOD again vindicates his servant.¹⁸ The servant is declared as God's righteous one (v. 11b) and ranked among the great ones because of his fidelity to the will of God. God promises to allot him "a portion with the great" (v. 12). While resurrection is not explicitly mentioned, his future reward is implied; furthermore, he will be an intercessor for those who turn to him.

What can we know about the identity of the servant of the fourth song? The song does not explicitly say who the servant is. However, of all the songs, this one gives us the most detailed description of the servant in the most personal language and style. Such personal language makes it difficult to see how Israel as a nation could be identified as the servant, especially the language about the servant's death in 53:8, 9, 12. Who then is the "he" that is frequently mentioned in the middle section of the song? It could be the prophet with whom the "we" sympathizes and remembers. Some scholars suggest that the "we" represents the nations and kings in 52:15 while others claim they are Israelites. A more likely possibility is that the "we" represents a group of disciples of the prophet who sought to reflect upon and interpret the mission and tragic death of the prophet. Consequently, the song would not be written by the prophet but by his followers about the prophet.¹⁹ This explains why the form of the song has a combination of thanksgiving, liturgical, and funeral motifs.

Who Is the Servant?

Biblical scholars have not fully reached a consensus concerning the identity of the servant.²⁰ However, various interpretations and personalities have been

¹⁸ Michael L. Barré argues that GOD is the one who inflicted suffering upon the servant for God's mysterious purpose. See Michael L. Barré, "Textual and Rhetorical-critical Observations on the Last Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13-53:12)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62 (2000): 11-23.

¹⁹ Ceresko, "Rhetorical Strategy," 44-47.

²⁰ For a detailed study of the theories and history of the various interpretations, see North, *Suffering Servant*. For a concise summary of the discussion up until the mid-1980s, see Lindsey, *Servant Songs*, 9-17. For a more current discussion, see William H. Bellinger, Jr., and William R. Farmer, eds., *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah and Christian Origins* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1998). This volume, which is a collection of papers from a colloquy at Baylor University, examines a variety of perspectives from experts in their field including articles from Otto Betz, Morna D. Hooker, Mikeal C. Parsons, Daniel P. Bailey, and N. T. Wright, just to name a few.

proposed.²¹ We will examine two proposals, first the servant as a representative figure and second as some mysterious historical person.

A Collective Figure—Israel

One popular view considers the servant as Israel, which represents a collective personality rather than an individual.²² Perceptive readers will notice that Israel is repeatedly designated as God's servant in Isaiah. Furthermore, in the second song the figure is explicitly identified by God who says, "You are my servant Israel" (49:3). Moreover, the servant's portrait and character in the four songs remarkably resemble Israel as a whole, which is also despised, rejected and humiliated by its enemies. As noted earlier, the personal and individual descriptions of the servant throughout the four songs, particularly in the fourth song (Isa 53), are quite distinct and do not fit with the historical Israel. As a result, some scholars shift their focus from an historical Israel to an ideal Israel. While the collective interpretation has good basis in the context of Isaiah and has appealing features, the identification of the servant as Israel is not without weakness and difficulty.

A Mysterious Historical Figure

Some scholars attempt to identify the suffering servant with an individual person rather than a collective group. Various past, present, or future figures have been proposed. One noticeable historical figure who has been considered as the servant is king Cyrus of Persia. The royal allusions and images that are found, especially in the first servant song (Isa 42:1-4) and its surrounding context, have led some to conclude this figure is the foreign king who seemed to fulfill Israel's hopes and dreams when he liberated God's people. As noted earlier, this identification poses many difficulties and has been rejected by most scholars today.

Another possible historical figure is the prophet Jeremiah. The prophet and the servant seem to have much in common, for example, their call, mission to the nations, and suffering (see Jer 1:4-5; 11:19; 18:19-20). In reality, however, Jeremiah's life, mission, and particularly his death, which can hardly be considered as an exaltation, do not match well with that of the servant.

²¹ Ellis ("Remarkable Suffering Servant," 25-29) offers a very fine summary and evaluation of the major approaches to the question of the servant's identity.

²² For Hoppe, the servant is Judah. In commenting on Isaiah 42:1-4, Hoppe writes, "It is most likely that the servant is Judah fulfilling its destiny to be the light to the nations, bringing about the victory of justice" (*Isaiah*, 112).

Other scholars claim that the figure in the songs is not from the past but is actually the prophet himself, namely Isaiah, who gives an autobiographical report about his own prophetic mission and the affliction that he endured in trying to accomplish God's will. There are others, however, who propose that the servant was an anonymous contemporary of the prophet, whom the prophet considered to be the Messiah. This messianic figure suffered and died vicariously for the sake of others. For New Testament writers, specifically Luke, this messianic figure is none other than Jesus Christ, whose life and mission, especially his death, fulfill the messianic expectation described in the four servant songs of Isaiah. The question is: Was this aspect of servant Christology derived from Jesus' self-understanding or was it introduced later by the early church, possibly by Luke, to explain Jesus' tragic death?

Making Sense of Christ's Horrific Death

There are four references ascribing to Jesus the title of the servant of God in the Acts of the Apostles (3:13, 26; 4:27, 30). All of them are found in the speeches of Peter. In the sermon at Pentecost, Peter begins by confessing to the Jerusalem crowds saying, "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus" (Acts 3:13) and ends the sermon testifying that it is God who "raised up his servant" (3:26). Later in Acts, Peter and the community who had just witnessed the power of God at work in their lives, fearlessly proclaimed that Jesus is God's "holy servant" (4:27, 30) who has been predestined to suffer, die and rise. These confessions by Peter possibly reflect an early Christian Christological *kerygma* or proclamation concerning Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophecy of the suffering servant of Isaiah.

The most explicit reference to Jesus as the suffering servant is found in the passage of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). In this passage, the eunuch asked Philip to interpret the fourth servant song of Isaiah and to identify to whom the prophet is referring, "about himself or about someone else?" (Acts 8:34). The passage that the eunuch is reading comes from Isaiah 53:7-8 (found in the LXX), in which Luke quotes, "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth" (Acts 8:32-33). Philip clearly identifies that Jesus is the servant about whom the prophet Isaiah has spoken. The Ethiopian Eunuch, who was likely a marginal Jew rather than a Jewish proselyte or a Gentile, responded favorably to Philip's interpretation of Scripture and requested to be baptized immediately.

Even before Philip's Christological confession in Acts, Luke had already identified Jesus as the suffering servant of God in his gospel. Luke made many indirect references to the servant songs at various important events in the life of Jesus.²³ Simeon's canticle in Luke 2:29-32 speaks about having seen God's salvation and being a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of Israel. The prophetic quotation is a combination of texts taken from the servant songs and other sections of Isaiah (42:6; 49:6; 52:10; cf. 46:13). At Jesus' baptism, a voice from heaven declares, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22; cf. Mark 1:11). This divine proclamation echoes Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1, the first servant song.

A similar divine pronouncement and revelation occurs at the Transfiguration (Luke 9:35; cf. Mark 9:7). As one who is anointed by the spirit to announce the good news to the poor, to cure the sick, to restore sight to the blind and to liberate the oppressed, Jesus' life and ministry according to Luke fulfills the words of Isaiah 42:1-4 (see Luke 4:16-21; 7:22). Jesus repeatedly teaches the importance of humble service (Luke 4:39; 9:46-48; 17:5-10). He even describes himself as a servant (22:27) and demands that the disciples also be servant leaders (22:26).

On the night before the crucifixion, Jesus told his disciples, "For I tell you that this scripture must be fulfilled in me, 'And he was counted among the lawless'; and indeed, what is written about me is being fulfilled" (Luke 22:37). The scripture passage that Jesus was quoting comes from Isaiah 53:12. Although Jesus did not recite the latter part of verse 12 that mentions the servant who "bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors," that Jesus quoted directly from the fourth servant song indicates that he understood his passion and death in the light of the whole passage.²⁴ It is very possible that the fulfillment formula used by Jesus in Luke 22:37 could confirm Jesus' self-identification with the suffering servant of God as described in Isaiah. However, there is no absolute certainty that Jesus cited Isaiah 53 or saw his mission and death as fulfilling the redemptive work of Isaiah's suffering servant.²⁵ It is likely that Luke has inherited the servant Christology from the early

²³ There are two direct quotations where Matthew claimed that Jesus fulfilled the words of the prophet Isaiah. In Matthew 8:17, the evangelist cites Isaiah 53:4 and in 12:17-21 he quotes Isaiah 42:1-4. In John 12:38, the Fourth Evangelist also cites Isaiah 53:1, claiming that Jesus fulfills the mission of Isaiah.

²⁴ Lindsey, *Servant Songs*, 5.

²⁵ For a view suggesting that Isaiah 40-55 as a whole was thematic for Jesus' ministry and kingdom announcement, see N. T. Wright, "The Servant and Jesus: The Relevance of the Colloquy for the Current Quest for Jesus," 281-297. For studies that support Jesus' own understanding of his mission and death in terms of the suffering servant of Isaiah, see Peter Stuhlmacher, "Isaiah 53 in the Gospels and Acts," in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, trans. Daniel P. Bailey (Grand Rapids, MI:

church and developed it further to explain and make sense of the scandalous death of Jesus the Christ.²⁶

The author of the gospel of Mark seems to have been the first evangelist to make the connection between the life and death of Jesus and the suffering servant of Isaiah. Jesus' three passion predictions about the Son of Man who will be handed over, crucified and rise again on the third day (Mark 8:31-33; 9:29-31; 10:32-34, and parallel passages in Matthew and Luke) echo the life and mission of the servant song, particularly from the fourth song. In his teaching, Jesus even portrays himself as a servant saying, "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45; Matt 20:28). Many of the words and phrases of Jesus in the institution narrative at the Last Supper (Mark 14:22-25 and parallels) reflect direct influences from the servant songs. Words such as "new covenant," "forgiveness of sins," and "ransom for many," have clear allusions to the vicarious suffering of the fourth servant song (Isa 53:10, 12). Finally, the manner in which Jesus suffered and died (Mark 10:34; 15:19; Matt 27:30 and parallels) is strikingly similar to the descriptions of the suffering servant of Isaiah. Following closely Mark's gospel, Matthew expanded Mark's allusions and references by citing two formula quotations to demonstrate that Jesus fulfilled the words of the prophet Isaiah (see Matt 8:17 citing Isa 53:4 and Matt 12:17-21 citing Isa 42:1-4).

The Gospel of John gives some additional allusions to the servant songs in the life and mission of Jesus Christ. John the Baptist's testimony concerning Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29; see also 1:36) alludes to the fourth song where the servant is "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter" (Isa 53:7). Interestingly, Jesus died at the moment when the sacrificial lamb is slaughtered in the temple. The Johannine motif of "lifting up" (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32-34) reflects also the description of the exaltation of the servant in Isaiah 53:13. According to John, the explanation for people's disbelief and their rejection of the Son of God is that it fulfilled the prophetic oracle of Isaiah 53:1. This fulfillment prophecy is directly quoted in John 12:38. In short, for the fourth evangelist as well as for the Synoptic writers, Jesus is the perfectly obedient son and servant of God who fulfills the ideal image of the suffering servant of Isaiah.

Eerdmans, 2004) 147-162, and Lindsey, *Servant Songs*, 139-45. For a synthesis of the different views, see Otto Betz, "Jesus and Isaiah 53," in *Jesus and the Suffering Servant, Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins*, ed. William H. Bellinger, Jr. and William R. Farmer, (HarrisburgPA: Trinity Press), 70-87.

²⁶ See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Anchor Bible 31; New York, NY: Doubleday, 1998), 414 and Donald L. Jones, "The Title 'Servant' in Luke-Acts," in *Luke-Acts: New Perspectives from the Society of Biblical Literature Seminar*, ed. Charles H. Talbert, (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1984), 148-165.

Nevertheless, the earliest Christian writer who associated Christ's life and death on the cross as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy seems to have been the apostle Paul.²⁷ Writing in the mid-50s, Paul proclaims and confesses to the Philippians the true nature of Jesus Christ who though in the form of God "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave [servant]" (Phil 2:7).²⁸ There are other Pauline references that indicate that Paul was not only familiar with the servant of God motif but moreover interpreted Jesus' life and especially his death as an atonement for the sins of many, which parallels the vicarious suffering servant of the fourth servant song (see especially 1 Cor 15:3-4; 2 Cor 5:21; Rom 4:25; 10:16; 15:21).

In the early second century C.E. during a time of intense persecution of Christians in Asia Minor, the author of First Peter also interprets Jesus' death as the messianic fulfillment of the suffering servant of Isaiah. First Peter makes plenty of allusions to the fourth servant song (see 1 Pet 2:22-24). One interesting element that is also found in First Peter is that the author interprets the suffering Christ as a prefiguration of the suffering Christians of the second century. The author of First Peter encourages the persecuted Christians in this way: "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps" (2:21). Similarly, the author of the letter to the Hebrews views Christ's death as a redemptive offering "to bear the sins of many" (Heb 9:28).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that while it is possible that Jesus could have viewed his life and mission in connection with the suffering servant of Isaiah, there is no concrete proof that it actually originated with Jesus' self-understanding. It is possible that the Christological interpretation of the servant songs might have been conceived by the earliest Christians soon after Jesus' resurrection (as attested by Peter and Philip in Acts) to explain and make sense of Christ's cruel and tragic death. Nonetheless, Luke was hardly the first evangelist to use the servant Christology to explain the scandal of the cross since this interpretation had already been developed in the gospel of Mark, which Matthew also retained and expanded. Based on the literary evidence that we have gathered, the apostle Paul was likely the earliest Christian writer to have employed the

²⁷ Hooker is convinced that the use of Isaiah 53 to interpret Jesus' mission began with Paul ("Did the Use of Isaiah 53," 103).

²⁸ It is possible that the Philippian Hymn in 2:6-11 was an early Christian hymn that Paul had received and quoted here.

servant Christology to explain both the scandal of the cross and Jesus Christ's tragic death. Consequently, Paul's servant Christology might have influenced the thoughts of the evangelists and later Christian writers.

Nurturing Mental Health with Spiritual Direction

S. Deva Savariyappan, SVD

Introduction

A jubilee offers not only a moment for celebration, but also a critical opportunity for spiritual renewal, introspection, and recommitment to one's foundational mission. In the context of the 150th Jubilee of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD), the theme "*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*" underscores the Society's enduring commitment to intercultural and holistic evangelization. The theme broadens the horizon of mission to include not only the proclamation of the Word but also the pastoral and psychological accompaniment of those in need.

Contemporary realities—marked by increasing levels of mental, emotional, and spiritual distress—call for an integrated approach to formation and ministry. In this light, spiritual direction emerges as a vital practice that fosters self-awareness, inner healing, and resilience. Drawing from pastoral experience in spiritual direction and counseling at St. Joseph's Catholic Institute of Theology in Yangon, Myanmar, the author explores the intersection of spirituality and mental health, emphasizing the relevance of spiritual accompaniment as a form of mission grounded in compassion, presence, and faithful service to the whole person.

Spiritual direction is not limited to one-on-one or face-to-face encounters. It also extends to those under our care in our workplaces and among people from diverse cultures, traditions, and life experiences. As Divine Word Missionaries, we are blessed with a unique opportunity to offer guidance and bring hope to those facing life's many challenges, as we serve in diverse,

multicultural settings—transcending cultural boundaries in the spirit of our mission. Spirituality and spiritual direction contribute positively to the overall well-being of the person. In today’s world, where mental health is a growing concern, spiritual accompaniment can offer meaning, inner peace, and resilience. By listening with compassion and journeying with others in faith, we support not just their spiritual growth, but their holistic well-being—mind, body, and soul.

We are called to be a light for those who dwell in the darkness of fear, anxiety, and life’s many trials. This Jubilee Year renews our calling and challenges us once again to live as true *“Witnesses to the Light—From Everywhere for Everyone.”*

Pilgrimage of the Soul

Spirituality Today

Deep within many of us lies a yearning for spirituality. Researchers have observed that interest in spirituality has surged across various fields in recent years, including education, business, science, and medicine. Terms like “spirituality,” “spiritual life,” and “spiritual direction” have become increasingly prevalent in contemporary discourse. For example, thousands of people journey to countries like Myanmar, Sri Lanka and India in search of meaning or spiritual enlightenment, often guided by spiritual teachers or gurus. These individuals are in search of direction, meaning, and purpose in life. Despite all their material possessions, they find their lives still feel empty, as though something crucial is missing. Many arrive with personal challenges but leave feeling peaceful and fulfilled. As one tourist remarked, “I went to India for the first time last year. I’d always been drawn to ancient Indian philosophy... It was, I guess you could say, ‘spiritual tourism’: travel for the purpose of spiritual growth.”¹

In recent years, Christian Ashrams have emerged across various regions of India. A Christian Ashram is a type of monastery modeled on Hindu hermitages. Years ago, those of us assigned to foreign missions had the opportunity to experience a Christian ashram, where we met many foreigners who had come to deepen their personal growth, self-awareness, and inner peace under the guidance of trained priests. These priests, often referred to as

¹ Jules Evans, “The Construction of Spiritual India,” *Philosophy for Life*, February 16, 2018, <https://www.philosophyforlife.org>

“Christian gurus,” led us through spiritual exercises, talks, and meditation. Many of these visitors would leave their families behind to experience a deeper spiritual connection with God. This trend continues to thrive to this day.

What is Spirituality, Anyway?

Spirituality has been defined in many different ways. For St. Arnold Janssen, it centered on the Holy Trinity—the Divine Word and the Holy Spirit in particular. His writings and legacy reflect a deep commitment to nurturing one’s relationship with God through following Jesus, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and engaging in prayer and reflection.

De Valle stated that SVD spirituality is missionary in nature, as it seeks to bring the life of God to others. The SVD emphasizes both diversity and universality, recognizing that God loves all people and has created us different and diverse so that we may have the courage to live together in harmony.²

Pope Francis offers a similarly profound perspective. He observes, “Today, many still seek religious security rather than the living and true God, focusing on rituals and precepts instead of embracing God’s love with their whole being.”³

But what does it mean to embrace God’s love with our whole being? The Pope explains further: “Are you married? Be holy by loving and caring for your husband or wife, as Christ does for the Church. Do you work for a living? Be holy by laboring with integrity and skill in the service of your brothers and sisters. Are you a parent or grandparent? Be holy by patiently teaching the little ones how to follow Jesus. Are you in a position of authority? Be holy by working for the common good and renouncing personal gain.”⁴

In essence, we are invited to imitate Jesus’ love and care for others through small, everyday actions—wherever we are and whatever we do. This, he suggests, is true spirituality, spiritual life, or simply being spiritual. Pope Benedict XVI summarizes this beautifully, stating, “The call to perfection or holiness is essentially what the Christian spiritual life is all about.”⁵

² Carlos De Valle, SVD, “Spirituality and Charism of the Divine Word,” *Correo Misionero*, no. 3 (Summer 2016).

³ FLL Editorial Team, “Francis: People Still Seek Religious Security Rather than the Living and True God,” last modified October 28, 2021, <https://fll.cc/en/inspire/pope-francis-people-still-seek-religious-security-rather-than-the-living-and-true-god/>.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation on the Call to Holiness in Today’s World, Gaudete et Exsultate*, March 19, 2018, no. 14; *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 2018, no. 110.

⁵ Mark S. Latkovic, “Catholic Men, the Spiritual Life, and Our Growth in Holiness-Perfection: Living Faith as Conversion, Knowledge, and Joy According to the Thought of Joseph

The Importance of Spiritual Direction

In our Christian life, we all—whether laypersons, religious, or clergy—need guidance. No one can achieve perfection in this life. We are imperfect people living in an imperfect world. We often lose our way and, at times, feel lost. Our intimacy with God may not always meet the mark. Spiritual direction offers a time-tested and effective way to bridge this gap. This practice has been part of Christian tradition since the time of the desert fathers and mothers in Egypt.

The 150th Jubilee of the Society of the Divine Word, with its theme “*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*,” provides a timely invitation to reimagine our missionary commitment not just in terms of geographic outreach, but also in how we accompany the inner journeys of those we serve.⁶ In line with the Society’s charism, which emphasizes intercultural dialogue and holistic evangelization, spiritual direction becomes a quiet yet powerful form of mission—especially when extended to those carrying hidden burdens of mental and emotional distress.

As countless individuals seek guidance to live more meaningfully and build closer relationships with God and others, we, as followers of Christ, also need a spiritual director to help us navigate this path. Henri Nouwen, with his characteristic simplicity, defined spiritual direction as “direction given to people in their relationship with God.”⁷

Numerous articles have been written on the role and importance of spiritual direction in the life of a Christian who is committed to deepening his faith and relationship with God. The purpose of this article, however, is not to repeat what has already been written, but to focus on some of the significant benefits that spiritual direction can offer for maintaining a healthy mental state through a strong spiritual life, guided by a spiritual director.

Spiritual Direction and Mental Health

Today, mental health professionals widely recognize the positive impact that spiritual direction can have on mental well-being. Recent research

Cardinal Ratzinger/Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI,” *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, November 16, 2015, <https://www.hprweb.com/2015/11/catholic-men-the-spiritual-life-and-our-growth-in-holiness-perfection/>.

⁶ Cf. Society of the Divine Word, *SVD General Chapter 2000*, Document no. 74; Alexander Rodlach, ed., *SVD Health Professionals Participating in God’s Mission to Heal* (Rome: e-Publications Generalate, 2023).

⁷ Henri Nouwen, “An Ecumenical Hub for the Study and Practice of Christian Spirituality,” *Center Quest*, last modified 2022, <https://cqcenterquest.org/faq/what-is-spiritual-direction-2/>.

indicates that “to many patients, religion and spirituality serve as vital resources in coping with life’s stresses, including those related to illness.

Many psychiatrists now acknowledge the significance of religion and spirituality in their patients’ lives. The importance of spirituality in mental health is now widely accepted.”⁸

In his November 2021 prayer intention, Pope Francis recognized the effects of modern life’s pace on mental well-being, saying, “Sadness, apathy, and spiritual tiredness end up dominating people’s lives, which are overloaded due to the rhythm of life today.”⁹ He emphasized the importance of proper accompaniment for those suffering. The term “*accompaniment*” here refers to spiritual direction or guidance. Supporting this call, Fr. Frédéric Fornos, S.J., International Director of the Pope’s Worldwide Prayer Network, said:

Our societies, with their relentless pace and ever-advancing technologies, contribute to depression and the stress-related burnout syndrome... Francis urges us to pray and be present for those experiencing extreme mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion. Psychological support is needed, but, as Jesus reminds us, his words offer comfort and care: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”¹⁰

We are made up of body, mind, and soul—three interdependent elements. The health of one affects the others, and thus spiritual health plays a key role in maintaining mental health. Under the guidance of a skilled spiritual director, individuals can experience a wealth of benefits for their mental well-being. A meaningful relationship with God can foster positive emotions. As Peter White observes, “There are situations where medication is necessary. However, in other cases, medication may mask a long-standing unhealthy lifestyle. Sometimes, we simply need to slow down. Spiritual direction provides a space to articulate our thoughts and emotions to another person. This is something we are hard-wired to need. In this way, it can act as ‘burnout insurance.’”¹¹

⁸ Abraham Verghese, “Spirituality and Mental Health,” *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 50, no. 4 (October 2008): 233–37, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/26889252_Spirituality_and_mental_health.

⁹ “Prayer with the Pope for the Challenges Facing Humanity,” The Pope’s Worldwide Prayer Network, 2021, <http://popesprayerusa.net>.

¹⁰ “People Who Suffer from Depression,” The Pope Video, 2021, <https://thepope-video.org/november-people-who-suffer-from-depression/>.

¹¹ Peter White, “10 Benefits of Spiritual Direction,” *The Sabbath Life*, January 9, 2017, <https://www.thesabbathlife.com/spiritual-direction/benefits-spiritual-direction>.

The Role of Spiritual Director in Mental Health

People typically seek spiritual direction when they are serious about deepening their relationship with God and others, and discerning God's will for their lives. Sister Catherine Liver, who has served as a spiritual director for 25 years, reflects, "It seems that many more people—perhaps due to the chaotic times we live in—are seeking a deeper sense of meaning in life and in their relationship with God."¹²

Clearly, individuals turn to spiritual directors when experiencing emotional or spiritual turmoil. They hope to gain insight into what God might be communicating through their challenging circumstances. A spiritual director helps them navigate stress and make wise choices regarding their relationships with themselves, others, and God. Through this process, individuals can experience a renewed sense of meaning, purpose, peace, and contentment. Genalin Niere-Metcalf, a psychologist and spiritual director, shares her personal experience to highlight the connection between spiritual direction and mental well-being:

Your growth in spiritual direction can enhance your ability to address psychological issues. There is something profoundly transformative when a person encounters God and experiences His unconditional love. This encounter strengthens the soul, enabling it to confront hidden shame and the painful aspects of the heart. . . I have seen directees face their grief and loss more deeply, instead of avoiding the pain, as they grow in their experience of God's love and care. Those struggling with depression or anxiety often begin to understand how shame has contributed to their psychological challenges, as God's love removes that shame and sets them free.¹³

A spiritual director can be seen as a catalyst—a mediator between the Holy Spirit and the directee. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the spiritual director helps the individual discover their potential and self-worth, contributing to the wholeness of body, mind, and soul. The vital role of the spiritual director in helping the directee achieve this holistic well-being can be summarized by the following benefits:

- Identifying and trusting one's own experience of God
- Integrating spirituality into daily life
- Discerning and making difficult choices

¹² Dan Burke, "Disciple of a Fool," *Catholic Spiritual Direction*, May 19, 2015, <https://spiritualdirection.com/2015/05/19/disciple-of-a-fool>.

¹³ Genalin Niere-Metcalf, "On Being a Spiritual Director and Clinical Psychologist," *Samarara Care Counseling*, 2021, <https://samaracarecounseling.org/on-being-a-spiritual-director-and-clinical-psychologist/>.

- Sharing struggles, losses, or disappointments
- Finding encouragement and affirmation
- Growing in relationship with God, self, others, and creation¹⁴

A Brief Interview on the Impact of Spiritual Direction on Mental Health

To assess the impact of spiritual direction on mental health, I conducted an interview with five seminarians from the Catholic Major Seminary of Yangon. They were asked the question: What benefits have you received from your years of spiritual direction? The respondents included two seminarians from the second year, two from the pastoral year, and one from the third year. Except for the third-year seminarian, who stated that he only benefited spiritually, the other four seminarians recognized the holistic benefits to soul, mind, and body. Some key responses are as follows:

- *Noel Paul Raj Thet Paing Soe (Third Year)*: Noel noted that spiritual direction “enabled me to become aware of my strengths, weaknesses, and shortcomings, as well as the areas where I need to make greater efforts to improve.” He added that spiritual direction helped him cope with his emotional struggles.
- *Robert Jacob Thi Ha Kyaw (Third Year)*: Robert echoed similar thoughts, saying that spiritual counseling “*raised my self-awareness.*” He also shared that, through proper direction from his spiritual director, he was able to overcome his fears, regrets, and spiritual dryness.
- *Paulinus Ghung Khui Shing (Pastoral Year)*: Paulinus stated that spiritual direction benefited him spiritually, psychologically, and emotionally. “I gradually became more aware of myself and improved my emotional maturity, which enhanced my spirituality.” Through his encounters with the spiritual director, he experienced increased self-confidence and self-acceptance: “I am able to accept my imperfections and surrender everything into the Hands of God, especially the things beyond my control.”
- *Paul Naw Ja (Pastoral Year)*: In addition to experiencing a greater awareness of God in his life, Paul felt that his self-esteem was strengthened. “I feel the worthiness of my being,” he said, “and that feeling encourages me to strive for personal growth.” He also explained how one of his spiritual directors encouraged him not

¹⁴ Cf. Ronald Bagley et al., eds., *Becoming a Young Adult Responsive Church: A Guide for Implementing Sons and Daughters of the Light—A Pastoral Plan for Ministry with Young Adults* (Naugatuck, CT: CMD, 1997), <https://dwc.org/diocese/ministries/young-adult-ministry/spiritual-direction-questions-to-ponder/what-are-the-benefits-of-meeting-with-a-spiritual-director/>.

only to make an examination of conscience but also to cultivate an awareness of every action he undertakes. “I was encouraged to focus on self-acceptance rather than on my imperfections,” he said. He acknowledged, however, that while spiritual directors can guide and accompany him, the ultimate responsibility for transforming his life lies with him.

From the responses of these seminarians, it is clear that they recognized the profound importance of spiritual direction for holistic growth. In particular, they noted its positive influence on their mental health. Mental health, as the seminarians describe, encompasses the overall well-being necessary for functioning effectively in all aspects of life. Based on this interview, I have identified four key benefits of spiritual direction that underscore its impact on mental health.

Spiritual Direction and the Development of Self-Awareness

The role of spiritual direction in fostering self-awareness was highlighted by seminarians during the interviews I conducted. Self-awareness is one of the key factors for good mental health. According to the Oxford Dictionary, self-awareness is the conscious knowledge of one’s own character, feelings, and thoughts. It is about being honest with yourself—understanding who you are, including your abilities, emotions, and limitations. Self-awareness is essential for positive mental health and can be likened to the ancient Greek aphorism, “Know thyself.”

One of the significant challenges faced by today’s youth is an identity crisis. Many try to imitate others, striving to become someone they are not. They face immense pressure from peers, family, school, and other social influences to con-form to others’ expectations. This creates a tension between their authentic selves and the personas they try to project. Blaming others for personal misfortunes, harboring envy, or fostering biases can prevent genuine self-awareness.

Self-awareness is crucial for overcoming self-importance, hypocrisy, biases, and prejudices. It promotes respect for diverse opinions and ideas, fosters healthier relationships with others, and strengthens one’s relationship with God. As Jesus said, “Whatever you do for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you do for me” (Matthew 25:40).

There is a saying: “Self-awareness is the oxygen of the spiritual life.” Spiritual direction provides abundant opportunities for developing this awareness. A 2018 study involving students from Christian institutions explored the role of attachment to God and spiritual self-awareness in evangelical Christians’ understanding of suffering. The study found that individuals with avoidant

attachment to God exhibited lower levels of spiritual self-awareness.¹⁵ Avoidant attachment refers to a mindset in which a person views God as distant and impersonal, feeling as though God does not care. In essence, those with a strained relationship with God tend to have lower self-awareness.

Spiritual direction is specifically designed to help individuals examine their inner lives. The spiritual director, with guidance from the Holy Spirit, helps the directee delve deeply into their spiritual interior. This examination is crucial, as Boniface Hicks explains: “Our interior life impacts—and is impacted by—everything we think, feel, say, do, and choose not to do. It is the place where we are alone with ourselves and alone with God.”¹⁶ Going deeply into one’s interior life is not easy. It requires openness and courage to face one’s wounds, brokenness, limitations, and weaknesses. One must become vulnerable to truly encounter oneself. Only then can the directee begin to listen to the voice of God. In the silence of the interior life, one can hear Christ’s voice, guiding them toward His will and nurturing a deeper relationship with God.

Spiritual Direction and the Improvement of Self-Confidence

Self-confidence is another key component of superior mental health. In fact, individuals with strong self-awareness tend to have higher self-confidence. As mentioned earlier, self-awareness allows a person to be honest with themselves—acknowledging both their strengths and weaknesses. This honesty is a crucial prerequisite for building self-confidence. Self-confidence refers to one’s belief in their own abilities and worth. It is essential in every aspect of life, as it enables individuals to achieve great things. However, many people struggle with low self-confidence due to challenging life circumstances, such as strained relationships, financial stress, or chronic illness.

Can spiritual direction play a role in improving self-confidence? Research suggests it can. A 2016 study conducted among university students in Indonesia found that spiritual counseling helped students improve their self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-control.¹⁷ This highlights the positive impact of spiritual guidance on personal growth.

¹⁵ Naomi A. Bock, “The Role of Attachment to God and Spiritual Self-Awareness in Predicting Evangelical Christians’ Appraisals of Suffering,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 21, no. 4 (August 2018): 1–17.

¹⁶ Boniface Hicks, “Going Deeper with Spiritual Direction,” *St. Paul Center*, September 26, 2018, <https://stpaulcenter.com/going-deeper-with-spiritual-direction/>.

¹⁷ Iip Istirahayu, Syamsu Yusuf, and Dian Mayasari, “Increase the Ability of Self-Direction through Spiritual Counselling,” *Global Illuminators* 3 (2016): 18–21, www.globalilluminators.org.

Moreover, faith in a higher power can significantly boost self-confidence. When individuals trust that someone greater than themselves is looking after them—someone who cares and provides—they feel less alone and more secure. In my interviews, seminarians like Paulinus Shing and Paul emphasized this trust, with Paul stating, “Put everything in the Hand of God.” The spiritual director’s role is to help deepen this faith, fostering trust in God’s providence and care.

When facing life’s struggles, people who are confident in God’s presence are more likely to approach challenges with assurance, knowing that the Creator is watching over them. As Seminarian Paul put it, “During spiritual direction, I feel safe to express my uncovered state of spiritual life. I can honestly reflect on what God is doing in my life.” Reflections like these undoubtedly contribute to greater self-confidence.

Spiritual Direction and the Boosting of Self-Esteem

In the interviews, seminarians acknowledged self-esteem as one of the key benefits of spiritual direction. As Robert Jacob put it, “This helps me stay in the present moment instead of focusing on things I might regret from my past or fears of the future.” Self-esteem refers to how much we value and appreciate ourselves. Whether one has high or low self-esteem often depends on how honestly we answer questions such as: Do I appreciate myself? Do I value my talents and abilities? How do I respond to compliments? Do I know my worth, or do I view myself as worthless?

In simple terms, self-esteem is the value we place on ourselves. Low self-esteem can wreak havoc on one’s life, destroying dreams, hopes for the future, and negatively impacting social and spiritual well-being. Threats to self-esteem include negative self-talk, undervaluing accomplishments, comparing oneself unfavorably to others, and blaming oneself for external problems. Low self-esteem can also be exacerbated by how others perceive and judge us. Healthy self-esteem requires a clear understanding of oneself and one’s abilities. As Caprile wisely notes, “It’s important to remember that we all have our own paths to walk. While feedback from others can be helpful in the quest for self-love, it will never replace it.”¹⁸

Can spirituality or spiritual direction help boost self-esteem? A survey of 464 participants consisting of respondents aged 15 and older examined self-esteem alongside religiosity, religious attendance, prayer frequency, negative religious coping, image of God, and spirituality. The results indicated that

¹⁸ Capril, “Low Self-Esteem? These Spiritual Practices Will Help,” *Spiritual Guidance*, December 5, 2019, <https://www.astrology.com/article/low-self-esteem-spiritual-practices/>.

regular prayer, spirituality, a low level of religious struggles, and a positive image of God were all linked to higher self-esteem. Interestingly, religious participants were found to have a 60 per cent lower chance of experiencing high self-esteem compared to non-religious respondents,¹⁹ which may suggest that spirituality's role in self-esteem can vary based on one's faith and practices.

However, as research suggests, spiritual practices like prayer and a positive image of God indeed promote a high self-esteem. For example, prayer is central to spiritual direction. As Fr. Bennet Kelley, OP, observes: "Unless a person is willing to devote him/herself to a life of prayer, and daily speaking to God, he is not yet ready for ongoing spiritual direction."²⁰ Both the spiritual director and directee must engage prayerfully, listening for God's voice. Spiritual direction, therefore, encourages regular prayer, fosters spirituality, and nurtures a positive image of God—elements that can profoundly enhance self-esteem.

Moreover, self-knowledge cannot be fully developed in isolation. We often need others to help us see ourselves more clearly and guide us toward our full potential. As the saying goes, "We are not the best judges of ourselves." Our self-perception can be clouded by doubts and uncertainties. Through consistent dialogue with a spiritual director, the directee gains crucial insights into their true self. Spiritual direction provides opportunities for deep reflection and understanding of one's identity.

Opus Dei, in an article on healthy self-esteem, explains: "Besides personal reflection, self-knowledge comes from what others teach us about ourselves. This requires learning how to open up to those who can truly help us: what a wonderful means we have in personal spiritual direction! There we receive another person's advice and consider it in relation to a truly worthwhile ideal for our life."²¹ A spiritual director, using scriptures and other spiritual literature, helps the directee see their value and worth. Passages such as the following can be especially empowering for someone seeking to grow in self-esteem:

- We are created in the image of God; everyone is called to develop and grow in this likeness (cf. Genesis 1:27).
- We are loved by God, despite our sinfulness (cf. Romans 5:8).

¹⁹ Katarína Gábová, Katarína Maliňáková, and Tavel, "Associations of Self-Esteem with Different Aspects of Religiosity and Spirituality," *Československá Psychologie* 65, no. 1 (February 28, 2021): 73–85.

²⁰ David W. Acklin and Boniface Hicks, "Guidance in Prayer from a Spiritual Director," *St. Paul Center*, September 24, 2018, <https://stpaulcenter.com/guidance-in-prayer-from-a-spiritual-director/>.

²¹ "A Healthy Self-Esteem," *Opus Dei*, October 8, 2015.

These and similar scriptural passages form the foundation of a positive self-image. By continually encountering God, we grow in the awareness of our intrinsic value as His beloved children.

Spiritual Direction and the Discovery of Meaning and Purpose in Life

Research has consistently shown that individuals with a strong sense of meaning and purpose in life experience better mental health, greater overall well-being, and enhanced cognitive functioning compared to those who lack such a sense of purpose.²² How, then, can one find meaning and purpose in life without proper self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-esteem? As we have already seen, spiritual direction fosters these qualities, which in turn enable a person to discover their meaning and purpose in life.

Throughout history, people from all walks of life have sought to understand the meaning of their existence. Questions like “Why am I here?” “What am I supposed to do with my life?” and “Where am I going?” are universal. In my own priestly experience, I have encountered people who frequently switch religions in search of deeper meaning, hoping to find a belief system that offers them clarity and direction. In this context, it’s valuable to remember the question Jesus posed to His first disciples: “What are you looking for?” (John 1:38). They, too, were seeking meaning in their lives, and Jesus invited them to “Come and see”—to find their purpose through Him.

Every religion offers a path to discover life’s true meaning and purpose. Buddhism, for example, teaches that the true purpose of life is to alleviate suffering through compassion and helping others. Christianity, however, teaches that the meaning of life is to seek the Lord, to know Him, and to love Him with all our strength (CCC1).

This is precisely where spiritual direction plays a pivotal role. One of the most crucial questions a person can discuss with their spiritual director is: “What is God doing in my life right now? What does He want me to do, and where is He leading me?” Pope Francis wisely reminds us: “If you are looking for meaning in life but not finding it, you throw yourself away with ‘imitations of love,’ such as wealth, career, pleasure, or addiction. Let Jesus look at you, and you will discover you have always been loved.”²³ This truth was

²² Kristen Fuller, “How Creating a Sense of Purpose Can Impact Your Mental Health,” *Psychology Today*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/happiness-is-state-mind/202203/how-creating-sense-purpose-can-impact-your-mental-health>.

²³ Pope Francis, “There Is No Better Way to Pray than as Mary Did,” *Pildoras de Fe*, June 27, 2020, <https://www.pildorasdefe.net/noticias/pope-francis-mary-prayer>.

demonstrated long ago when Jesus walked the earth. In the Gospels, we read about a rich man who sought meaning in life. He came to Jesus, who instructed him: “Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor. Then come and follow me, and you will have treasure in heaven” (Matthew 19:21).

Integrating the Theme “*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*” into Spiritual Direction and Mental Health—for Ourselves and Those We Serve

The theme, “*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*,” chosen for the SVD’s 150th Anniversary, invites us to reflect on how we care for both ourselves and those who come to us for guidance. In the context of spiritual direction and mental health, it calls us to offer inclusive, compassionate, and holistic support that honors the diversity and dignity of every person. Some recommendations:

a) Holistic Care: The theme highlights the SVD’s global mission. Integrating spiritual direction and mental health support fosters holistic care by addressing the spiritual, emotional, and psychological needs of individuals from diverse cultural and personal backgrounds.²⁴

b) Embracing Diversity: Recognizing the richness and complexity of human experiences allows us, as SVDs, to offer more compassionate and effective care. This reflects the theme’s call to serve “*From Everywhere for Everyone*,” embracing all people in their uniqueness.²⁵

c) Accompaniment and Support: Spiritual direction offers meaningful accompaniment for individuals on their spiritual journeys, including those facing mental health challenges. By offering such support, we affirm our commitment to the integral care of each person—spiritually, emotionally, and mentally—living out our mission to reach “Everyone.”²⁶

d) Mission and Evangelization: By responding to both the spiritual and emotional needs of individuals, we enhance the effectiveness of our ministry and evangelization. Reaching out to people of varied backgrounds and cultures, we affirm our dedication to a more holistic, inclusive, and compassionate approach to care and mission.²⁷

²⁴ Cf Alexander Rodlach, ed., *SVD Health Professionals Participating in God’s Mission to Heal* (Rome: e-Publications Generalate, 2023), 57–58.

²⁵ Society of the Divine Word, “Prologue,” in *Constitutions of the Society of the Divine Word*.

²⁶ Cf. Philip Gibbs, “Mission and Culture,” in *The SVD Connection*, 295.

²⁷ Cf. Society of the Divine Word, *SVD General Chapter 2000*, Document no. 74.

Conclusion

Numerous studies have highlighted the profound positive impact of spirituality on mental health, both generally and especially in times of crisis. Spiritual and mental well-being are deeply interconnected, each influencing and reinforcing the other. Developing healthy self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-esteem is crucial for discovering meaning and purpose in life—key components of mental wellness. A spiritually grounded person is often more likely to maintain a positive mental state.

However, spiritual growth rarely occurs in isolation. As Christianity teaches, we are fellow pilgrims on a shared spiritual journey. We need one another for support and encouragement to navigate life's challenges. This mutual support helps us resist the temptations of loneliness, avoid unnecessary complaints born from a lack of sacrifice, refrain from speaking ill of others, and prevents us from indiscriminately seeking consolation from anyone who will listen—often driven by our longing to be understood.²⁸

In the spirit of the Jubilee theme, "*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*," we recognize that this journey of mental and spiritual renewal is not confined by geography, culture, or background. It is a universal call inviting people from all walks of life to come together, support one another, and share the healing power of faith and fellowship. In embracing this inclusive vision, we foster a community where everyone—regardless of where they come from—can find hope, purpose, and renewed strength for the challenges ahead.

²⁸ Cf. Pope Francis, "Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to Priests on the 160th Anniversary of the Death of The Holy Curé of Ars, St John Vianney," August 4, 2019, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190804_lettera-presbiteri.html.

Laudato Si E-Trading Network: Innovation and Sustainability on a Planet in Peril

Benigno P. Beltran, SVD

The Spirituality of Economics and Ecology

*“We have created a nation of remarkable wealth and productivity,
yet one that leaves its impoverished citizens in degrading life conditions
and almost completely ignores the suffering of the world’s poorest people.
We have created a kind of mass addiction to consumerism,
relentless advertising, insidious lobbying,
and national politics gutted of serious public deliberation.”
(Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The Price of Civilization*)*

The Laudato Si e-Trading Network (LSe-TN) is in response to Pope Francis’s social encyclical, *Laudato Si*, calling on every person on Earth to help achieve sustainability: “What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?” (LS, no. 160).

The encyclical’s subtitle is “On Care for Our Common Home.” In the words of Pope Francis, “The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change” (LS, no. 13). The social encyclical declares that human-induced climate change is a scientific reality and its control is a moral imperative for humanity; otherwise, human evolution cannot continue, and human beings will become extinct and cease to exist.

The founding organizers of the LSe-TN, inspired by the encyclical, intended the network as an activity of the Synodal Church. The encyclical and

Pope Francis' teaching on the Synodal Church are deeply intertwined, emphasizing the importance of listening, dialogue, and collective action. The encyclical calls for an "integral ecology" that recognizes the interconnectedness of all creation, including human beings and the environment. It highlights the social dimensions of ecological issues, such as poverty, inequality, and climate change. It strongly urges individuals and communities to take action to protect the planet and promote sustainable practices. For its part, the Synodal Church emphasizes the importance of listening to all members of the Church, including the marginalized and those on the peripheries. It promotes dialogue and discernment as essential tools for decision-making and encourages collective action to address the challenges facing the Church and the world.

The encyclical and the Synodal Church are rooted in justice, solidarity, and participation. Both call for a collaborative approach to addressing complex issues like climate change and social inequality. Both likewise recognize the importance of empowering the laity to play an active role in the Church's mission. Thus, the encyclical provides a theological and ethical framework for addressing ecological challenges. At the same time, the Synodal Church offers a practical methodology for implementing these solutions through dialogue, discernment, and collective action. By combining these two elements, the Church can become a powerful force for positive change in the world.

Pope Francis called not only on Catholics but on all people of goodwill, no matter what the race, creed, or nationality, to take up the sustainability challenge: "I urgently appeal . . . for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all" (LS, no. 14). He says, "Whether believers or not, we agreed today that the earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone" (LS, no. 93). In his speech to the US Joint House of Congress on September 24, 2015, Pope Francis declared: "Now is the time for courageous actions and strategies aimed at implementing a culture of care and an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature."

According to Pope Francis, this collaboration is needed because "Everything is connected. Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society" (LS, no. 91). He continues: "A global consensus is essential for confronting the deeper problems, which cannot be resolved by unilateral actions on the part of individual countries. Such a consensus could lead, for example, to planning sustainable and diversified agriculture, developing renewable and less polluting forms of energy,

encouraging more efficient use of energy, promoting better management of marine and forest resources, and ensuring universal access to drinking water” (LS, no. 164).

The global economy has been shaped by economic forces, not social or ecological ones. It is sometimes described as autistic, rewarding only those who already have the most; it is often enthralled with complex mathematical models that exist only in imaginary worlds.¹ The economy, however, should be at the service of human beings and the natural world, at the service of life. According to *Laudato Si*, creating a future where all people can prosper will require a fundamental rethinking of how the economy should be structured. In light of the economic principles spelled out in Catholic Social Teaching, *Laudato Si* seeks to implement an alternative monetary system based on the economics of solidarity and respect for natural processes while serving the community of life. It supports an economic system where self-organizing communities control essential natural resources. *Laudato Si* forges economic and social development from the bottom of the social pyramid to build a sense of community by connecting intense, often dispersed, pockets of energy and knowledge among the urban and rural poor.

William Easterly wrote in *The White Man's Burden* that aid cannot end poverty—poor people die not only because of the world's indifference but also because of the ineffective efforts of those who care.² The desperate needs of the poor have little weight compared to the vanity of the rich—more money is spent on beauty products than on educating poor children. Only homegrown development based on the dynamism of persons and corporations in innovative markets can help the poor thrive in a global political economy. Thus, the LSe-TN aims to empower the poor to create their future, shape their destiny, and control their lives. It implements a digital marketing and a “green” distribution strategy based on a network of organized communities in the context of a spirituality of liberation and ecology, a spirit of democratic governance, and efficient economic management.

The acquisition and distribution of wealth have always had crucial ethical and moral issues. The power of markets is enormous, but they have no innate moral dimension. Markets concentrate wealth in the hands of a few, pass environmental costs to other taxpayers, and often abuse workers and consumers.

¹ Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (New York, Times Books, 2007), 100. Economists according to him think of human beings primarily as individuals and not as members of a community and their ideal of a human being is a self-contained want-machine bent on maximizing utility (p. 111).

² McKibben, *Deep Economy*, 7.

Human beings have to decide how to manage them.³ David Korten claims that in highly unequal societies, the very rich are prone to seek affirmation of their worth through extravagant displays of excess. They quickly lose sight of the real sources of human happiness, sacrifice authentic relationships, and deny their responsibility to the larger society—at the expense of their essential humanity. At the other extreme, the desperate are prone to manipulation by political demagogues who offer simplistic analyses and self-serving solutions that, in the end, further deepen their misery. In a culture of poverty, the struggle for survival makes it difficult for people to reflect upon their situation. Governing institutions lose legitimacy. Democracy becomes a charade. Moral standards decline. Civic responsibility gives way to extreme individualism and disregard for the rights and well-being of others.⁴

Development and prosperity should be measured by “the quality and the realization by each person of the creative potential of their humanity. A high-performing economic system supports the development of this potential, provides every person with an adequate and dignified means of livelihood, maintains the healthy vitality of the planetary ecosystem that is the source of real wealth, and contributes to building community through strengthening the bonds of affection, trust, and mutual accountability.”⁵ Thus, the LSe-TN must keep innovating—enhancing healthy food production, reducing its prices, seeking to please its customers, and monitoring its impact in transforming lives. It must work to build up enduring coalitions among the urban and rural poor, propose concrete policies for effective modes of governance, and imbue its stakeholders with a sense of solidarity, shared purpose, and a renewed sense of confidence in the future to create a path towards a world glowing with harmony and prosperity.

Our forefathers believed that the Earth did not belong to them; they belonged to the Earth. They did not have the concept of absolute ownership of the things of the Earth. They realized that human beings are social beings and that they are also economic, political, and spiritual beings. Economic concerns are only one among other values and needs that make us human. Is there any way at all that this joy, this deep religiosity, this indomitable energy and gritty

³ Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), xiii. Korten says we have to do away with economic systems where economic growth remains the primary value, consumerism defines cultural values and the excesses of corporate behavior are not constrained by fairly enforced rules. See David C. Koren, *Agenda for a New Economy* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010), 42. We have to face the reality of “an out-of-control and out-of-touch financial system devoted to speculation, inflating financial bubbles, stripping corporate assets, and predatory lending” (p. 43).

⁴ *Yes! Magazine*, August 11, 2012.

⁵ Korten, *Agenda for a New Economy*, 301.

determination of the Filipino can be harnessed so that they can organize themselves, mobilize on a massive scale, engage the economic and political system, take risks, and decide communally which risks they have to take so that they can attain what they consider of value in the light of their history and culture?

Oikonomia means stewardship. We have failed to be compassionate stewards of the planet. The global political economy that causes garbage dumps all over the world, the slums, the spirals of violence, the terrorist bombings, and the pollution of the environment are glaring proofs that we have not been excellent stewards of the planet. We did not comply with our duty to steward the capacity of the Earth to sustain all life and nourish everyone in it. Modern civilization is inspired by a vision that equates human progress and unbridled economic growth with the growth in the market value of economic output. It subordinates both human and ecological values to that goal. This ideology assumes that Mother Earth's resources are inexhaustible and the environment can absorb the waste generated by the consumer society. We must move away from the mistaken ideology of infinite material progress towards genuinely sustainable economies.⁶

Western economics made wrong assumptions about human nature, thinking of the human being as *Homo economicus*, a being who makes decisions based on rational self-interest. Western economics consider extreme mathematization and distance from normative concerns as signs of objectivity and rigor, much like the hard sciences. Guided by the invisible hand of the free market, the prevailing economic theory in the world today sees the pursuit of self-interest to automatically produce the best outcomes for everyone by maximizing value for shareholders who care only about their wealth and the return of their investments. The only goal of business firms is to maximize profit, and the measure of success in national policy is GDP per capita growth. In other words, the ideology behind the global political economy maintains that the self-interest of a rational, autonomous, individual utility-maximizer automatically leads to collective well-being.

The purely rational, greed-motivated person is a functional psychopath—thically unmoored with no moral compass to guide decisions, caring nothing for the welfare of others. The economic doctrine based on self-interest has often led to the overexploitation of natural resources and social problems that make life worse for everyone, not better. The global financial crises that have happened and are bound to happen repeatedly have caused many companies

⁶ See Tim Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (Routledge, 2011). See also Richard Heinberg, *The End of Growth: Adapting to Our New Economic Reality* (New Society Publishers, 2011); John Michael Greer, *The Wealth of Nature: Economics as if Survival Mattered* (New Society Publishers, 2011).

to go bankrupt and some nations to declare bankruptcy. The personal costs in terms of unemployment, poverty, and health have been immense.

The understanding of human beings by free-market economists has not looked closely at how human beings evolved—the best survival strategy for *Homo Sapiens* was to cooperate and to suppress the greed and selfishness that was good for the individual but harmful to the tribe—driving animals toward teammates yielded more meat than hunting alone. The human species survived because our ancestors believed everyone must make personal sacrifices to follow ethical rules and avoid harming others. The LSe-TN believes it is high time for a paradigm shift in economics based on the survival strategies of our ancestors and not relegate our interdependent futures to mindless, values-neutral “market forces.” The purpose of the economy is to provide for the sustaining and flourishing of life. It cannot do this if economists continue to imagine it as an ethics-free and compassion-free sphere.

To accomplish its objectives, the LSe-TN is guided by the values of Solidarity, Integrity, and Creativity to ensure that the economic system works for most people. The LSe-TN also advocates for redistributing financial and natural capital, cutting back on the consumption of material things, and living with green technologies to build a sustainable future. The planet cannot sustain the global political economy as it is being run today, where the environment and economy are always on a collision course. We have to discover new economic models based on limited natural resources. We have to promote eco-efficiency and produce more with less. Filipino inventors must design new products that generate social and natural value for the poor. In other words, the LSe-TN calls for the reorganization and transformation of the global political economy in the light of Catholic Social Teaching and the call of the *Laudato Si* encyclical to care for our common home. This is the only planet we have and the only home we can live in.

The LSe-TN, in promoting its Farm to Table program, the direct trading between the rural and urban poor, believes that the economic system should strengthen the bonds of human solidarity and help those in need to escape the poverty trap. Economic systems are a means, not an end. It holds that the solution to global poverty must lie in establishing a just world order in which the rich nations no longer live off the sweated labor of the poor from the economically undeveloped world. It aims to build a mutual agreement between people who produce things and those who buy them. Its standards result from equals transparently negotiating in good faith with the intention of both parties to satisfy their basic needs. These negotiations are facilitated through the use of Generative AI, the Internet of Things, blockchain technology, and other cutting-edge discoveries of science.

Catholic Social Doctrine is based on solidarity between human beings - economics, therefore, should foster pro-social behavior. It strongly promotes and defends democracy and freedom and fosters universal human rights based on the dignity of the human person. This doctrine has elaborated several fundamental themes, apart from human dignity and worth: the common good, the solidarity of all human beings, the social destination of all goods of the Earth, social justice, and the religious origin of the right to individual property. Pope John Paul II described in *Centissimus Annus* a form of capitalism shaped within the framework of democracy and the culture of life.⁷ He also championed three fundamental human freedoms as the framework for human development: religious and cultural freedom, political freedom through democracy and the rule of law, and economic freedom through creativity and innovation.

This results in a world where “producers” and “consumers” see each other as people and work together to create a sustainable global economy and society. The LSe-TN would like to measure the living standard by the citizens’ well-being, the communities’ good, and the ecosystem’s flourishing, not by the Gross National Product. Growth will need to rely much more on sustained improvements in human capital, institutions, and governance. The global economy has to be built on a just and sustainable foundation. Without social justice, there will be no world peace.

Pope John Paul II wrote in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus* that “the purpose of a business firm is not simply to make a profit, but is to be found in its very existence as a community of persons who in various ways are endeavoring to satisfy their basic needs, and who form a particular group at the service of the whole of society. Profit is a regulator of the life of a business, but it is not the only one; other human and moral factors must also be considered which, in the long term, are at least equally important for the life of a business.” This is the business principle that the LSe-TN would like to implement among the urban and rural poor. To develop entrepreneurial skills among the urban poor, the Laudato Si Institute for Entrepreneurial Leadership was set up to deliver business training through AI-powered apps, which will promote among the urban poor education in strategy, accounting, and marketing with instruction in morals, character, and religious values through GenAI.

⁷ Capitalism is meant by Pope John Paul II here as an economic system which recognizes the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property and the resulting responsibility for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector. It does not mean a system in which freedom in the economic sector is not circumscribed within a strong juridical framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality, and which sees it as a particular aspect of that freedom, the core of which is ethical and religious. Cf. *CA*, 42.

The Laudato Si Institute for Entrepreneurial Leadership aims to teach financial literacy, environmental responsibility, problem-solving, creative thinking, collaboration, and interdependence among the urban poor, especially women entrepreneurs, whom the LSe-TN believes are a crucial driving force for economic growth in the country. Even though women own the majority of micro and small enterprises in the Philippines, their businesses tend to be smaller, have fewer employees, and have bleaker growth prospects than their male counterparts. Only 5 percent have access to bank financing, leaving them with fewer resources to invest in their businesses. Although entrepreneurs need money to start their businesses, non-financial assistance, such as mentoring and training, ensures their business succeeds and can repay their loans.

The LSe-TN also seeks to deepen and expand women's leadership in the struggle for land in rural and urban areas and to take care of Mother Earth by using agroecological production practices and enlightened consumption to enhance food security. We must re-engineer how we produce food and adopt a holistic approach to advance our well-being and the health of our ecosystems. It is dangerous for a social enterprise if it does not evolve. The heart and soul of a social enterprise are creativity and innovation. The network would like to come to terms with the implications of the Fourth Industrial Revolution for agriculture.

To enhance organic farm production among farmers and fishermen, the Laudato Si Institute for Sustainable Agri-Ecology was established. The aim is to intensify organic food production while ensuring that the natural resource base on which agriculture depends is sustained and improved for future generations. The poor must equip themselves with new strategies, innovative approaches, and the expertise needed to do their farming and marketing with excellence. The LSe-TN has partnered with other start-ups to use sensors and drones to give farmers more information about their land and planting design. It will use predictive analytics to increase production.

The LSe-TN seeks local investments that will benefit communities over the long term by creating jobs, supporting local businesses, and fostering the local food chain. The network likewise aims to connect investors to the places where they live, creating vital relationships and new sources of capital for small food enterprises so that the 21st Century will become the era of nurture capital, built around principles of carrying capacity, care of the commons, a sense of place and non-violence.⁸ The world is producing more than enough

⁸ "In the 21st century, investing is not only about markets and sectors and asset allocation. In a world that is speeding up and heating up, losing its soil and losing its sense of common purpose, investing is also about reconnecting and healing broken relationships. What could make more sense than taking a small amount of our money, turning in a new direction, and putting it to work near where we live, in things that we understand, starting with food?" says Slow Money

food to feed its entire population. Still, the food does not reach many people because of barriers like monopolized access to the land, the stranglehold over productive resources, and the increasingly concentrated control of the food chain. The network will continue to explore new and multi-disciplinary economic strengthening approaches to help the extremely poor meet essential services and participate in markets, such as improved access to social safety nets, human services, and market development programs.

The network would also like to differentiate itself by treating the economy as a subsystem of the ecosystem and emphasizing preserving natural capital. Farmers and family farm production play a central role in building food sovereignty. It seeks to foster harmonious coexistence based on mutual solidarity between rural peoples, including peasants, fisher folk, indigenous peoples, and the urban poor in the slums of the cities. It also aims to broaden the e-trading network to include urban dwellers threatened with impoverishment and with demolition and eviction to make way for real estate speculation; consumers among the poor who face ever higher prices for food of an ever-worsening quality that increasingly contains more and more chemicals.

The LSe-TN believes that sustainable development and economic progress must be characterized by a world of social and environmental justice, in which human rights are respected, in which policy and decision-making are transparent and inclusive, in which the economy serves people and respects the planet, an economy for a just and sustainable future towards a world glowing with harmony and freedom. It calls for neither unending “economic growth” nor economic stagnation—but for what might be called a “convergent economy” —a sustainable society where everyone can become all they can be. This convergent economy is also internally sustainable since the despair of the poor and the avarice of the rich are replaced with sharing.

True prosperity occurs when people’s ways of making a living are true to who they are and converge with an evolving cosmos.

The Challenge of a Sustainable Future

“The old economic model has utterly failed us. It has destroyed our communities, our democracy, our economic security, and the planet we live on. The old industrial-age systems - state communism, fascism, free-market capitalism - have all let us down hard, and growing numbers of us understand

founder and former venture capitalist Woody Tasch. Laudato Si is looking to network with local entrepreneurs who can demonstrate that their projects, in addition to financial viability, promote larger social and environmental goals.

*that going back there isn't an option.
But we also know that transitioning to some kind of a new economy -
and, probably, a new governing model to match -
will be a civilization-wrenching process.
We're having to reverse deep and ancient assumptions
about how we allocate goods, labor, money, and power
on a rapidly shrinking, endangered, complex, and ever more populated planet.
We are boldly taking the global economy -
and all 7 billion souls who depend on it -
where no economy has ever gone before."*
(Sara Robinsion, *Alternet*, May 16, 2012)

The shaman lighted the sacred fire and murmured prayers of gratitude to their tribal gods. Grim-faced warriors with shields and spears, clad in g-strings, and tribal maidens clad in their best finery, descendants of fierce headhunters, surrounded the shaman. They then beat on their brass gongs and danced around the sacred flames, the ground resonating with the heavy stamp of their bare feet. Beside the fire lay a trussed black pig.

The shaman took a sharpened bamboo stake and pierced the pig's throat. Its squeal of pain drowned the beating of the gongs. The pig was dressed, its entrails divined for auspicious beginnings, and pieces of meat were roasted in the fire—all shared rice wine in coconut shells. Then, dancing amidst the beating of the brass gongs began again in earnest, the warriors vying with each other to show off their muscles and physical prowess to the tribal maidens dancing in a circle around them.

When one of the tribal maidens handed me a red cape as an invitation to dance with them, I placed it on my shoulders, pranced to the beating of the gongs, and danced my heart away, inviting the whole universe to come and dance with me.

It was the celebration of a peace pact between the Kalanguya tribe from the mountains of Nueva Vizcaya and the people of Smokey Mountain in the Parish of the Risen Christ in 2008. Smokey Mountain was a massive garbage dump in the heart of the City of Manila. Headed by then-Mayor Jun Padilla of the town of Sta. Fe, truckloads of tribal peoples came down to the dumpsite and brought agricultural products, hand-woven cloth, fruits from the forests, and ornamental plants to trade directly with the members of the Smokey Mountain cooperative.

The trading activity was the first of the cooperative's many attempts to trade with members of the indigenous peoples. Later, Mangyan tribes from the island of Mindoro and the Dumagats from the mountains of the Sierra Madre also brought their farm products to be sold in Smokey Mountain. The

marketing of these products uses technology and networking to harness the power of the free market and address eco-justice issues while asking whether the global political economy is leading the world to death or life. In 2024, Jun Padilla sought to revive the partnership. The group was reorganized into the LSe-TN with its e-commerce platform designed to bring healthy food to the Catholic dioceses in Metro Manila.

The experience of direct trading between subsistence farmers in rural areas and scavengers in a garbage dump led to the question of how to create significant social, economic, and environmental impact sustainably. It allowed millions of Filipinos to escape poverty with the technologies they need to raise their incomes, the proper distribution systems, and business incentives at all levels. How can we restructure agriculture into highly intensive household farming to increase production and to advocate for massive credit, infrastructure, and extension programs for organic farmers? How can we industrialize our organic protocols to increase production and provide more people with food without toxic chemicals and pesticides? We have to move the economy into a more sustainable and just direction, starting with orienting ourselves toward a new goal—not more, but better—better health, better jobs, and a better chance to survive and thrive in the face of global poverty, global conflict, and the climate emergency. The network members hope to face these challenges with renewed hope and the use of cutting-edge technologies in agricultural production and online marketing.

How can Catholic Social Teaching be harnessed to create a moral and ethical economy for this besieged planet?

Human cultural learning gives rise to a form of cumulative cultural evolution that, over centuries, gradually produces increasingly complex tools, technologies, bodies of knowledge and skills, communication systems, and political and economic institutions. Due to this cumulative cultural evolution, urbanization has become so bound up with financial capital and the caprices of the world's financial markets. Urbanization and the digital revolution have created a global ecosystem of interconnected cities and regions. So, we have to look for transformational, game-changing solutions to combat global poverty by building sustainable social enterprises directly linking the urban and rural poor that will leave a legacy of social good for decades to come.

Deciding to confront these issues, groups with the same converging vision established a trading network that would link the rural with the urban poor through the Internet, especially the Basic Ecclesial Communities in Catholic parishes. The context of the conceptual framework for this network where the rural poor can trade directly with the urban poor is the connection between globalization and urbanization, the intertwining of the urban and “non-urban”

economies, and resolving the tension between GDP vs. sustainable development by using different bottom lines. The LSe-TN would seek to generate income to support social objectives and, at the same time, improve the strategies and methods social problems are addressed—we cannot solve today's problems with yesterday's solutions. We cannot go on making Catholic Social Teaching the best-kept secret of the Church.

How can we focus the great diversity of uncoordinated, small-scale efforts to address every problem under the sun to solve the problem of global poverty? How can one grow a triple-bottom-line social enterprise with substantial, stable profits while focusing on authentic care and concern for customers, employees, and the planet? We must see the economy as embedded in ecosystems and understand the interaction between economic and social processes to solve the economic crisis. To solve one global problem, we have to see it as connected to others. Any global emergency is linked to other emergencies, so we must consider systems. We must look ahead and be responsible for future generations by engaging in large-scale system change.

The Philippines needs widespread and sustainable economic growth, and the country is showing some progress. Much remains to be done to reduce poverty, however. The most significant contribution to reducing poverty must come from the agricultural sector, where most Filipinos earn their livelihoods. It is a terrible irony that the people who grow the food are often also the ones who go hungry—their crops are too paltry, or prices too low, for their harvest to see them through the year. For subsistence farmers, the harvest is a question of survival or starvation. Poverty among farmers is a complex problem to solve—it would require addressing water and sanitation issues, improving agricultural methods and irrigation systems, promoting economic development initiatives, facilitating access to markets for farm products, running youth leadership development training to inspire the young to engage in farming, ensuring safe childbirth courses and disease prevention, to name just a few of the puzzle pieces needed for impoverished farmers and fisherfolk to begin to overcome their poverty truly.

In the convergent universe, the new paradigm is now the network—Network or die! In the global digital economy, economic activities form an interconnected network powered by technology, Artificial Intelligence, and humanoid robots. So, the partners from the rural and urban sectors decided to harness the power of science and technology to transform slum areas and subsistence farming, believing that providing information and knowledge through technology can fuel innovation and enable individuals and communities to lift themselves out of poverty. When suppliers of farm products understand the needs of their customers through data collected from their mobile phones, they

can be more responsive to these needs; when farmers know about more precise methods of analyzing the soil by using drones and sensors, they can use this to their advantage; when information about market trends trickles down to small scale businesses through an e-commerce platform, they can respond rapidly to new opportunities; and when women and men understand the business environment in a global context, they can become more effective entrepreneurs.

The idea is to provide critical information through digital devices and then harness the creativity of the Basic Ecclesial Communities among the urban and rural poor to solve problems in their communities and change their societies innovatively using a mix of entrepreneurship and innovation. The strategy is to combine the best elements of both—creativity, sustainability, cost-effectiveness, and integrity—to redefine the development paradigms of the past. When the poor have a better understanding of their political and economic situation and the demands and constraints of their environment, they make better, more sustainable, and more profitable decisions on their own.

The Laudato Si e-Trading Network

*“If we ignore the important ways people cooperate to create wealth,
we miss the most valuable source of wealth creation imaginable.
Recognizing the true value of relationships, we can build
stronger relationships and create and share more incredible wealth.”*
(Anna Bernasek, *The Economics of Integrity*)

The LSe-TN is a social mission-driven wealth-creating enterprise with a triple bottom line (People, Planet, Prosperity). It is technology-driven and seeks economic growth, environmental protection, and social inclusion. The network has a social purpose combined with a minimum threshold of financial sustainability. Its principal objective is poverty reduction to improve the quality of life of the urban and rural poor.

The network aims to provide better and more organized agricultural markets to break farmers out of the cycle of poverty and build sustainable communities using their resources to meet their needs, improving their business models, marketing methods, and bottom-line profitability through an e-commerce platform. It creates wealth to cover its operations and invest in other activities related to its social mission; at the same time, it fosters social and economic value that accrues to the poor farmers and fisherfolk as primary stakeholders. Its financial bottom line plays a supportive role to its social bottom line. In producing and providing naturally-grown food products and selling these goods and services, the poor are engaged as workers, clients, suppliers, and partners in the Laudato Si value-chain ecosystem.

Agricultural output and productivity have to be boosted, especially for smallholder farmers, by giving them access to improved agricultural inputs and advanced technologies and helping them develop their marketing infrastructure to deliver organic rice, fruits, and vegetables to more and more people in the urban areas. This is important to reduce the effects of high and volatile prices on national food security. The increase in production and the sale of naturally-grown products are not the end of the story, as the partners are also very committed to developing the local community. Products are sourced locally, production and distribution systems are put into place to stimulate the local economy, and microfinance loans benefit local farmers, especially women farmers. The women in the slum areas use their distribution networks to sell products through the *Laudato Si* e-commerce platform.

The former Bishop of the Diocese of Cubao, His Excellency Bishop Honesto Ongtioco, permitted the stakeholders of the LSe-TN to sell naturally-grown food products in the patios of the churches of 46 parishes in the diocese. In this way, the network turns market economies into market communities. The vision of the LSe-TN converges with Priority Agenda # 4 of the Diocese of Cubao: Upholding Human Dignity and Integrity of Creation—"We are witnesses to the neglect of the value and dignity of the human person, especially of the poor and marginalized sectors, whose rights are constantly threatened and attacked. Our Catholic faith emphasizes our responsibility to uphold and respect the basic dignity of our fellow humans. Therefore, we strive to maintain a Catholic community where everyone enjoys basic human dignity and respect and lives without prejudice and discrimination." The advocacy to help farmers improve their economic status and that of their whole family adds to upholding their basic human dignity and their right to be assured of a sustainable future.

In addition, Priority Agenda # 4 of the Diocese of Cubao is in response to the challenge of Pope Francis to "protect our common home." It is also our responsibility as Catholics to address environmental problems, primarily if they affect the poor and vulnerable people. The LSe-TN is in response to the challenge of Pope Francis' encyclical, to Hear the Cry of the Poor and to Hear the Cry of Mother Earth as a Synodal Church, where Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) work together to respond to the needs of the poor and the ecosystem.

The members of these BECs have now been organized into the *Laudato Si* Consumers' Cooperative. The cooperative will market the products of farmers and fisherfolk from its partners in the provinces to its members among the urban poor in illegal settlements and slum areas. Its motto is "Hear the Cry of the Poor, Hear the Cry of Mother Earth."

The LSe-TN signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Department of Agriculture, Region IV-A, in 2014. The DA sought to help enhance organic production among small farmers from five provinces (Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal, and Quezon) and market these in parishes in the dioceses of Metro Manila in coordination with the National Organic Agricultural Board of the Department of Agriculture. The network has also partnered with the Calabarzon Organic Exchange (CORE), which provides fresh, naturally-grown produce from the surrounding provinces of Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal, and Quezon (Calabarzon). Energy costs of transporting the products were minimized, personal exchanges between the farmers and the consumers were increased, and the local economy was cushioned from food shocks when there were financial shocks elsewhere in the world.

Partnerships have recently been forged between the LSe-TN, the Benguet Agri Pinoy Trading Center in La Trinidad Valley, and the Nueva Vizcaya Agricultural Terminal. Region 3 of the DA, with seven provinces and an estimated 10,000 farmers, planned to sign a Memorandum of Agreement with Laudato Si. The Department of Agrarian Reform recently communicated its intention to join the network and is currently mobilizing the Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries' Organizations for this end. These partnerships embrace the industrialization of organic protocols through regenerative agrotechnology and the greening of the supply chain distribution networks to combat the dire effects of climate change. Agriculture is responsible for more than 40% of carbon emissions, so the success of these partnerships will significantly impact the campaign to lessen carbon emissions.

The goal of putting up Sunday Organic Markets in the Catholic parishes in Metro Manila is to provide food without synthetic chemicals and pesticides to as many people as possible and create a fair trade system in which communities exchange surplus production for mutual benefit. Laudato Si has found that only an integrated approach that looks at both demand and supply sides using an e-commerce platform simultaneously can trigger successful agro-value chain development. Post-harvest handling, agro-processing, and value addition should also be considered. Post-harvest losses due to poor storage facilities and lack of transport options are significant at present – with pests and diseases destroying an estimated 15-30% of farmers' hard work and preventing them from selling surplus crops or better feeding themselves and their families.

Laudato Si will market organic products in the Catholic parishes of Metro Manila with small mark-ups through the Laudato Si Consumers' Cooperative because it intends to buy high and sell low once economies of scale have been reached. This is done through bulk purchasing—the combined population of

the areas covered is almost one-third of the whole country's population. Laudato Si partners with government entities because development must occur within a framework of protective legislation to protect small stakeholders against price exploitation. Cheap financing, access to markets, extension education, and community organizing among farmers and fisherfolk are other vital inputs that the government has pledged to provide. Laudato Si also advocates for land reform because the land reform law in the Philippines is too verbose, extremely complex, insufficiently radical, with many loopholes, and with an absurdly extended timetable for implementation to make a dent in the empowerment of farmers. Secretary Conrado Estrella III has pledged to plug these loopholes to raise the standard of living of land reform beneficiaries.

The network seeks to fundamentally and permanently transform the context, global in nature, which gives rise to the opportunities and challenges for which its solutions are designed. To achieve this, the business strategies chosen for Laudato Si are:

- To organize the rural and urban poor communities for entrepreneurial activity and leverage their buying power through an expanded customer base and improved market access using technology.
- To enhance the stakeholders' capabilities, skills, and motivation to offer customers a more valuable relationship.
- To establish value-based two-way market linkages with suppliers and consumers who share the same values.
- To deliver cheap and quality goods conveniently through an operationally efficient (green) supply chain distribution system.
- To implement business operation processes more efficiently by utilizing Generative AI and Microfinance Management Systems (MMS) powered by GPT4.

The critical success factors of Laudato Si are the establishment of:

- Strategic Culture: The core values to be inculcated are those required to motivate, empower, and align members of poor communities behind the mission. To empower them with organizational skills that can be mobilized for economic activities, the values chosen are *pagpapakatao*, *pakikipagsandiwaan*, and *pagkamakasaysayan* (Integrity, Solidarity, and Creativity). This kind of culture supports creativity, embraces diversity, and promotes personal growth to foster innovation and sustainability.
- Strategic Competencies: The skills and knowledge the stakeholders need to become knowledge workers, enhance their ability to innovate and build a learning organization required to support the mission.
- Strategic Partnerships: Joint ventures with like-minded suppliers are required to implement the mission and maximize supplier strength to capture the total value

of service in the marketplace. The Laudato Si supply strategy must create accurate, repeatable benefits that build supplier loyalty and consistency and gain sustainable supply-based competitive advantage.

- Strategic Logistics: The speed and efficiency of supply chain management systems should be critical to operationalizing the mission. Using cutting-edge ERPs, supply strategy should seamlessly integrate with marketing initiatives and management techniques.
- Strategic Processes: Operational excellence in cost, quality, and cycle time in using information and communications technology and enterprise management systems is needed to measure and control performance and actualize the mission.

The LSe-TN contributes to poverty alleviation by combining wealth creation and business opportunities by aggregating the buying power of urban and rural poor communities, using cellphones, computers, and laptops to improve logistics, price performance, distribution systems, and economies of scale. Laudato Si combines business innovation along the whole value chain ecosystem with the power of technology to empower the poor and restore people's connection to the value they create while protecting the environment. It promotes economic development at the local level, with local leadership guided by a sustainable vision of justice and peace for all on this only planet we have.

The Laudato Si e-Commerce Platform

*“Show me how you take care of business
without letting business determine who you are.
When the children are fed but still the voices within and around us
shout that soul’s desires have too high a price,
let us remind each other that it is never about the money.”
(Oriah Mountain Dancer - Invitation to the Dance)*

The source of wealth has always been human ingenuity. A dynamic economic sector powered by technology combined with business acumen is the best hope for the poor to lift themselves out of poverty, unleash the forces of their creativity, initiative, and imagination, and enter the circle of prosperity. The motto of Laudato Si is: Imagine. Innovate. Impact! As an innovation network for entrepreneurship and sustainability, it continues to innovate so that technology solutions can be fused with self-sustaining models for significant, scalable, positive impact on the lives of the poor. To paraphrase an old saying, The keyboard is mightier than the sword.

Since rapidly evolving technology holds the promise of introducing affordable financial tools that can reduce the barriers to market inclusion in a safer, more effective, and transparent way, Laudato Si makes use of Artificial Intelligence and Data Analytics to move the poor from cash-based to electronic financial transactions, such as mobile phones, smart cards, and ATMs. Laudato Si is now beta-testing an e-commerce platform using an open-source platform to do this. It will be ready to be scaled up around the first Quarter of 2025. The platform will network the farmers and fishermen in agricultural co-operatives with the urban poor in the Laudato Si Consumers' Cooperative.

The Laudato Si e-commerce platform uses a cloud-based e-commerce technology with the usual store management features, e.g., product management, order fulfillment, online payments, coupons, and customer relations apps. It is designed to have customization features that can offer personalized shopping experiences based on past shopping preferences for organic products. The open-source platform has unlimited customization options for excellent usability and manageability. There are plugins and extensions to make room for scalability and free social media extensions. It is designed to be very user-friendly for the urban and rural poor, using it to make their business processes more efficient. The Laudato Si e-commerce platform is integrated with AI-powered apps with production management and forecasting features using predictive analytics. The intersection of GenAI and agriculture promises a sustainable future amid growing global food demands and climate emergencies. Innovative AI solutions can transform farming practices, enhancing efficiency and resilience.

The platform will also use blockchain technology to provide organic farmers with access to all information on transactions that happen to their products from farm to fork to end exploitative market practices that leave farmers unaware of the actual market prices of their products. Since the organic products marketed by Laudato Si come from large numbers of organic producers, consumers would become aware of the quality and safety of the products they buy when Laudato Si has labeled the food product “organic” or “Halal,” these were strictly grown according to standards set by the government. They would also know from which farm the products came.

The Laudato Si e-commerce platform offers a mobile-friendly shopping cart, seller mobile apps, and many other mobile-based features available. Round-the-clock technical support via live chat, phone, and tutorials, along with the powerful Laudato Si community forum, is also being planned. Digital wallets will be another form of payment option. It will have a built-in analytics system, essential for every e-commerce website. Focusing on analytics is vital to running an e-commerce platform successfully. If you can't collect relevant

data, you cannot learn about customer behavior, which is at the heart of all conversions. Data gathering is even more crucial for Laudato Si because farmers need predictive analytics for plant design. The urban marketing teams need to know beforehand what produce they will sell.

We are now working on an AI-powered app to help farmers make data-driven decisions, maximizing their resources and likely yields. In addition, the app will use machine learning algorithms in loan repayment predictions, input demand forecasting, and pricing optimization. It will also encourage farmers to adopt improved agricultural practices contributing to good soil health. This device helps farmers reduce agricultural risks and generate higher incomes. An AI-powered app is also designed to advise farmers on sustainable farming practices offline and in their language through simple voice calls. The tool enables them to make informed decisions and adopt climate-smart practices. These examples demonstrate the transformative potential of generative AI in agriculture. But it is not just about technology. The LSe-TN is about collaboration and collective action.

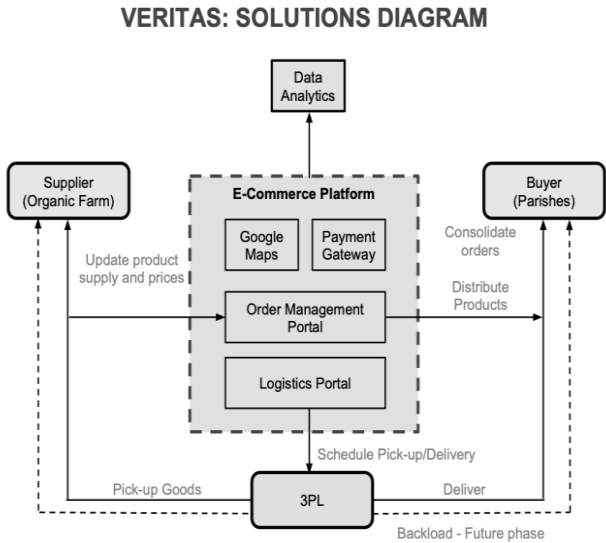
Laudato Si aims to conduct its mission by demanding specific values from its stakeholders that comprise its ethical core—Solidarity, Integrity, and Creativity. These values were found during the implementation of the pilot project to maximize integral human development and guide people toward creating a more humane world. These values were rooted in the Trinitarian faith through years of theological reflection and economic praxis. These values, intended to foster an economy of Solidarity, Integrity, and Creativity, are rooted in belief in the triune God. Thus, Laudato Si aims to promote the Economics of Integrity, the Economics of Solidarity, and the Economics of Innovation and Creativity.

The core values Laudato Si believes in are a central part of its business strategy to help make difficult transitions tolerable. These values are critical for inspiring collective commitment. Running a business ethically and remaining values-based is the right thing to do to become a good company that brings results. We must foster a values-based economic philosophy against the value-neutral economic culture of the free market, immune from any moral, ethical, or religious code in which profit and financial gain become the sole measure of success and in which values and people are ignored. Current economic systems are changing the world in horrendous ways. The greatest challenge today, the only real question of our time—is to see whether we can transform those economies enough to prevent some damage and help us cope with what we cannot control. Otherwise, Bill McKibben says, the transition will be tragic.⁹

⁹ McKibben, *Deep Economy*, 232.

In the next 40 years, we need almost double our food production to feed our fast-growing population in the Philippines. By 2050, nearly 150 million mouths will need to be fed, and each mouth will have more money than ever to spend on more varied and better-quality food. Global agriculture is already one of the most unsustainable sectors in the world. It is by far the most significant driver of poverty, child labor, slavery, loss of biodiversity, water scarcity, climate change, and deforestation. How we double food production without destroying the Earth may be the biggest challenge of our lifetime. And we don't get a second chance to get it right. We hope to survive by following the Laudato Si business model outlined above.

Small farmers not only constitute the majority of the world's poor, but they are also the majority of the world's small and medium enterprises. Through collective action based on the right values, farmers can improve their performance and income. Laudato Si facilitators, equipped with the right approaches and tools, will be trained to do more to support the farmers' business organizations in their entrepreneurial endeavors in light of the core values described above. Laudato Si sees farmers as autonomous entrepreneurs, not as target groups or beneficiaries. In this light, farmers' organizations become business supporters. The central question is how farmers, through the collective action of their organizations and imbued with the values of Integrity, Solidarity, and Creativity, can better access credit and remunerative markets and improve their production and yields. This is crucial for the Laudato Si business model.

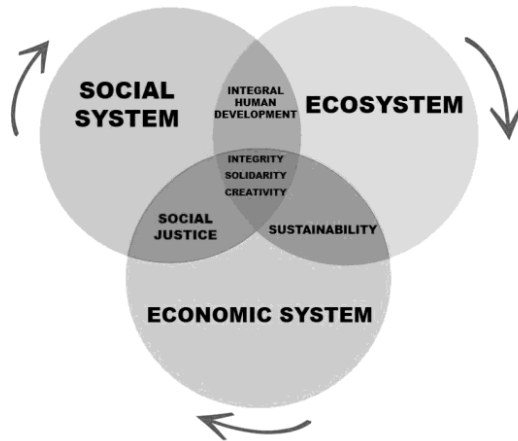


Laudato Si sees poor people as agents of their integral human development. It focuses on what poor people see as their best strategy for escaping poverty: getting a job or growing a business. It orients its business strategy around creating products and services that improve the lives of the poorest of the working poor. Through the Laudato Si e-commerce platform, the urban poor will be networked with small farmers who produce vegetables, grains, and other crops to feed themselves and sell at a much grander scale with much greater effectiveness at the local market. Rural farmers can avoid costly hybrid seeds, chemical fertilizers, and the false promises of industrial agriculture by joining the Laudato Si marketing network. Farmers' profits will be raised since no middleman will take a cut. And poor people will get access to fresh, cheaper, healthy food. Based on the principles of minimum soil disturbance through no-till organic farming methods, the organic farmers will be taught online how to do crop rotation and use permanent soil cover since conservation agriculture increases the fertility of the farmland. The permanent soil cover from crop residue decomposes into organic fertilizer and enriches the soil. This cover helps retain moisture, which can help them grow a second crop without over-dependence on rain.

The world's economies have become more closely integrated by the global political economy, where international financial markets and transnational corporations control globalization for their benefit. The complex, global, technologically driven economy in which nation-states compete to capture markets and key links in global supply chains forces the poor to adapt to the dictates of the free market. This global political economy is an incredibly complex network of systems, and social entrepreneurs who are forced to act in the face of this uncertainty and complexity want guidance that nobody can give in the face of all the contradictions, uncertainties, and complications that economists are finding out. The core values of Laudato Si are designed to help its stakeholders find a way to live in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous context on a highly urbanized and globalized planet. The Laudato Si e-commerce platform aims to promote these core values by embedding them in the trading network process.

Towards a Convergent Economic System

Only the right combination of business models and e-commerce platforms will survive the competition in a global political economy. The business model that underpins the Laudato Si e-commerce platform is summarized by the Venn diagram below:



It depicts the convergence of the ecosystem with the social system and the economic system. Its strategies are based on actions promoting integral human development, social justice, and sustainability. The core values are Solidarity, Integrity, and Creativity. All this is understood in light of the new understanding of the universe ruled by physical laws built upon the principles of quantum mechanics. The paradigm shift now is from things to ideas, from hierarchy to networks, from information technology to interaction technology, and from seeing organizations as machines to viewing them as communities. We have moved to quantum mechanics and relativity from Newtonian physics' mechanistic and rationalistic clockwork universe.

In quantum physics, we know that space is curved, that gravity is the warping of space and time by physical mass, that time and space are not two dimensions but one linked frame of reference, and that time is part of the physical universe. In this world, Newtonian cause-and-effect logic has no place. Systems analysis and the development of chaos and complexity theories have spawned even more complex ideas – non-linear systems do not behave like mechanical objects. These ideas are slowly permeating into economic theories at present. To seek meaning is to answer the questions of purpose in a convergent universe, creating coherence out of chaos and providing a compelling vision of what tomorrow can bring. This is the context of the Laudato Si vision for a convergent economic system. Because what is now being born is a convergent economy, Laudato Si aims to be values-based, network-connected and innovation-fueled to provide a more optimal environment for new ideas, sustainable growth, and human flourishing.

The continuing argument among economists with contradictory prescriptions for growth is a product of philosophical assumptions about what a human being is and the role of government. No matter how sound the economic data

is, this cannot be fully resolved without a proper understanding of what the economy is for. In this business environment, Laudato Si has linked the indigenous tribes and impoverished farmers and fishermen with the urban poor in Metro Manila in an integrated pattern of relationships facilitated by information and communication technology. The network, at the same time, is responsive to the needs of the ecosystem and focuses on sustainability as the driver of innovation—Laudato Si understands convergent economics as promoting integral human development, social justice, and sustainability.

Laudato Si leverages existing networks to create vibrant new markets that serve bottom-of-the-pyramid consumers and designs trading relationships that reach and sustainably benefit small-scale producers. Ecological economics has become a business imperative in manufacturing products and delivering services, an economy that restores natural and human capital. Intelligent investment in market mechanisms can deliver enhanced profitability and a stronger economy, help solve the climate crisis, and create a better future for the planet.

Laudato Si implements new business models that create economic activity at the bottom of the pyramid, providing people on the margins of the global economy access to products and services that address minimum basic needs. It creates sustainable businesses that directly benefit communities among the urban and rural poor by marshaling “solidarity funds” for needy entrepreneurs and small farmers, developing trans-regional infrastructure in the country, and promoting education and research for the common good. It actualizes Pope John Paul II’s encouragement to the poor in his encyclical *Centissimus Annus* #34: “to acquire expertise, to enter the circle of exchange, and to develop their skills to make the best use of their capacities and resources.” Sustainable economic development presumes circles of trust and mutual respect. Laudato Si enlarges these circles of trust among the poor to sow the seeds for an economic system based on ecology and human solidarity.

Laudato Si exploits market opportunities among the desperately poor and provides them with knowledge, skills, and technologies to allow them to help themselves. It starts with helping them understand why they are poor and involve them in the effort to create their wealth. In this context, women are central to economic growth and development. Women need full access to all levels of education, move up to positions of the highest responsibility in the organization, and have access to all available opportunities. Women have to exercise their full potential and become more involved in management, especially in health services, because maternal health and education consistently prove crucial, and managing savings and investment as in the microcredit movement, which is built around responsible women who pay their debts trustworthily.

Laudato Si began by developing an open trading and financial system that was values-based, predictable, and non-discriminatory, making the benefits of new technologies available, especially information and communications technology. The greatest challenge Laudato Si encountered in creating a sustainable, socially responsible, and profitable operation among the urban and rural poor was managing the supply chain effectively. In seeking to use information and communications technology, Laudato Si was hampered by the lack of technical training and digital skills, the lack of business advisory services, and difficulty in accessing relevant hardware, software, and connectivity, especially access to the Internet. Another difficulty encountered is that organic producers agree upon few standards on what organic or naturally grown means so that they can be certified by the Department of Agriculture as “organic.”

Agroecology is a science, but it is also seen as a movement or practice concerned with farming methods based on peasant’s knowledge, local inputs, and nature’s principles rather than external inputs and technologies that damage nature, such as the green revolution model. But for Laudato Si, agroecology is not just about ecological productive principles but also social and political principles. A feudal landholding cannot be considered agroecological even if it is chemical-free; a farm that is controlled only by men without any role and decision-making power for women is not agroecological either, neither is a so-called organic farm, which replaces expensive chemical inputs for expensive organic ones without touching the structure of monoculture.

To work towards sustainable agriculture, Laudato Si advocates the halt of farmland expansion in constructing subdivisions, improving crop production, fostering more strategic use of water and nutrients, reducing food waste, and dedicating croplands to direct human food production, especially in degraded areas. Improved use of existing crop varieties, better management, and improved genetics could increase food production to nearly 60 percent. The Department of Agriculture claims that pests destroy, spoil, or eat one-third of the food farmers produce. Eliminating waste in the path food takes from farm to table could boost food available for consumption by another 50 percent.

We realized early on that if Laudato Si is to contribute significantly to poverty reduction, its target group should be large enough. It must focus on those at the bottom of the pyramid. Laudato Si faces the challenge of ending absolute (\$1.25 per day) poverty among the urban and rural poor. We found out that we could not just help farmers grow more healthy food; we had to develop a market also. We have put up incubator hubs where the poor and millennials can discuss how to scale up their businesses. Laudato Si Organics markets organic products, including soap, herbal oils, and beauty products that do not degrade the ecosystems.

Markets are often controlled by a cartel of a few large producers who manipulate prices to their advantage and the disadvantage of the small farmers, who usually do not possess the ability to transport perishable goods and negotiate a fair price. This makes them easy prey for a trader who picks up the produce at rock-bottom prices. We learned about this the hard way. Laudato Si started with around 20 evangelical pastors in Payatas, the garbage dump in Quezon City, who wanted to implement the vision of justice and peace in God's Kingdom. They pooled their resources, and we could buy 20 sacks of rice to be sold in a small store. The merchants in the area got together, lowered their prices, and our store went bankrupt in two weeks. Without economies of scale, the poor are quickly swallowed up in a predatory system of economic activity. An enormous amount of economic activity occurs outside competitive markets dominated by for-profit, private firms. This informal economy has different rules than the one equating economics to the "market."

After that sad experience, Laudato Si changed its strategy for survival and sustainability by establishing community-supported enterprises collaborating with organic, small-scale post-carbon farmers. It promoted whole-systems agroecology among impoverished farmers: traditional practices that enhance soil productivity and use beneficial trees, plants, animals, and insects to ward off pests rather than relying on chemical fertilizers and pesticides and using vast amounts of water and energy. Laudato Si organized farmers and fishermen into a pool of strategic partners dedicated to the vision of helping establish communities for joint economic activity to assist in poverty reduction and social transformation, as well as for health reasons.

Laudato Si connects the satisfaction of basic human needs to ethical, moral, and spiritual matters to arrive at sustainable consumption levels. In a political-economic system where the everyday lives of more than a third of the nation continue to be subject to overwhelming misery, chaos, and disruption, Laudato Si advocates a reorganization of the economic system and the social system to allow a broader sharing of the gains of economic growth in a sustained and systematic way to preserve the health of ecosystems. Laudato Si is building an app to manage its microfinance projects with Sporos, the Laudato Si Microfinance Management System, for better financial access.

In the United States, the National Institutes of Health reported that four of the six leading causes of death are linked to unhealthy diets. In the Philippines, the people's diets have started to fill up with unhealthy food that is less nutritious and often filled with chemicals, growth hormones, pesticides, antibiotics, and toxic elements, as they lose the ability to feed their children with locally-produced, naturally-grown food. The biochemists at De La Salle University, who are partners of Laudato Si, showed me statistics on breast cancer

among Filipinas. As Dr. Marissa Noel said, they have the highest incidence in Southeast Asia and number nine globally. This was why the WOW Organic Restaurant and Laudato Si Organics were put up. We wanted more people to have better access to healthy food and prevent diseases.

Laudato Si supports livelihood programs and efforts aimed at social transformation while seeking to bridge the digital divide. Laudato Si synthesizes the technological capability of the poor (most of them have cell phones) with market needs. It integrates these two aspects in one activity, as it were, to incarnate spirituality in economic activity and to situate economic activity in a moral and ethical foundation. Laudato Si's primary beneficiaries are the poor in the rural and urban areas. The primary workers are women, traditional breadwinners, and entrepreneurs in poor communities with better credit risks than men. Laudato Si makes essential commodities available at prices lower than the market and empowers them through spiritual formation and information technology to rise above their present situation. The entrepreneurial ethic is promoted through consumer education, upgrading skills for higher remuneration, encouraging them to save, and helping them become all they can be while subscribing to the core Laudato Si values. Savings is widely recognized as one of the best financial inclusion and enterprise development methods. It can help to prepare households for emergencies and take advantage of economic opportunities when they arise.

The Global Political Economy

*"The gross national product counts air pollution and cigarette advertising,
and ambulances to clear the highways of carnage.
It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for people who break them.
It counts the destruction of the redwood
and loss of the natural wonder in chaotic sprawl ...
the gross national product measures everything,
except that which makes life worthwhile."
(Robert Kennedy, University of Kansas, March 18, 1968)*

The opening decade of the twenty-first century has seen surges in food crises, with hundreds of millions of people chronically food-deprived in an era of rising food prices and widespread speculation. On a global scale, the World Bank reports that over half the global population lives on less than \$2.50 per day, and over 800 million people go hungry daily. According to UNICEF, nearly 8 million human beings died in 2010 because they were too poor to stay alive. Meanwhile, the U.N. reported in 2005 that the wealthiest 500 people in the world earned more than the poorest 416 million. According to the same

report, the wealthiest 350 people in the world own assets commensurate to more than 50% of the world's population. Finally, according to a 1998 UN Development Report, the wealthiest 15 people on the planet have assets that exceed the total annual income equal to the poorest 98% of those living on the African continent. This prompted Pope Francis to declare during a visit to a soup kitchen in Rome on May 21, 2013, that "A savage capitalism has taught the logic of profit at any cost, of giving to get, of exploitation without thinking of people... and we see the results in the crisis we are experiencing."

Thanks to the Internet, we live in a network economy formed bottom-up by interactions between people in a highly connected marketplace. Some basic rules govern these interactions, but for the most part, the system, like the Internet, emerges freely and unpredictably. We also live now in a growth economy where the chief currency is ideas, and the mechanism for growth is innovation. While traditional economics tells us that productivity comes simply from adding more capital or generating greater efficiency, Convergence Economics, as proposed by Laudato Si, emphasizes ways where broadly defined technologies transform production to promote integral human development, social justice, and sustainability.

The advent of new technologies can create better recipes for economic growth. We live in a growth economy in which the chief currency is ideas, and the mechanism for growth is innovation. While traditional economics tells us that productivity comes simply from adding more capital or generating greater efficiency, convergence economics emphasizes how broadly defined technologies transform the means of production. The advent of new technologies can create better recipes for economic growth. There is an inherent lack of predictability in future operations because they do not add up linearly, and economic structures can evolve into qualitatively different forms. Robotics, nanotechnology, and Artificial Intelligence will profoundly impact economics. Still, the expanding economic network will converge in the end because it is a self-consistently creative, ever-evolving, emergent whole. This convergent economics is inherently beyond predictive control.

the global political economy gives inordinate power to those at the top who shape the political process according to their vested interests, making a few people fabulously wealthy at enormous social and environmental costs to the vast majority. When one interest group holds too much power, it succeeds in getting policies that benefit itself rather than society. When the wealthiest use their political power to benefit excessively the corporations they control, much-needed revenues are diverted into the pockets of a few instead of

benefiting society at large.¹⁰ The global political-economic system is a winner-take-all proposition. And so, the world has come to this conclusion: if Walmart were a country, according to a report issued by *Business Insider* (June, 2011), its revenues would exceed the GDP of Norway, the 25th largest economy in the world.¹¹ *Business Insider* claims that Yahoo is bigger than Mongolia, Visa is bigger than Zimbabwe, Nike is bigger than Paraguay, McDonald's is bigger than Latvia, Amazon.com is bigger than Kenya, Apple is bigger than Ecuador, Ford is bigger than Morocco, Bank of America is bigger than Vietnam, General Electric is bigger than New Zealand, Chevron is bigger than the Czech Republic, and Exxon-Mobil is bigger than Thailand. The world's richest 10% accounted for roughly 85% of the planet's total assets, while the bottom half of the population – more than 3 billion people – own less than 1% of the world's wealth.

In 2009, Forbes magazine reported that the 40 richest Filipinos had a combined wealth of \$22.4 billion. The amount more than doubled to \$47.43 billion the year after that.¹² 32 million Filipinos are earning only P 38 a day (about one US dollar). Corporations believe their only duty is to generate ever-higher returns for shareholders by attracting customers. To do this, they sometimes become ruthless, lay off thousands of workers, pay starvation wages to laborers in developing countries, and pillage the environment.¹³ The market is free,

¹⁰ Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future*, W.W. Norton, New York, 2012, p. 83. The more divided a society becomes in terms of wealth, the more reluctant the wealthy are to spend money on common needs, according to him (p. 93). See also his *Freefall: America, Free Markets and the Sinking of the World Economy*, W.W. Norton, New York, 2009.

¹¹ Stiglitz claims that the six heirs of the Wal-Mart empire command wealth of \$69.7 billion, which is equivalent to the wealth of the entire bottom 30% of U.S. society. See *The Price of Inequality*, p. 8. The inequality is the result of political forces as much as economic ones. Market forces help shape the degree of inequality and government policies shape those market forces. He wrote that much of the inequality that exists today is a result of government policy, both because of what it does and does not do.

¹² According to the IBON Political and Economic Briefing, July 12-13, 2012, the net worth of the 40 richest families in the Philippines increased by 40% from 2011 to 2012. Combined net worth in 2012 is US\$34 billion which, for comparison, is equivalent to 27% of the country's gross national income in 2011. In 2012, the number of Filipino billionaires increased from 11 to 15. Interestingly, the corporations of most of these billionaires have also benefited from greater opportunities in government contracts especially those in relation to public-private infrastructure projects. Their corporations have also benefited by capturing water, electricity and oil thus practicing monopoly pricing.

¹³ Robert B. Reich, *Supercapitalism: The Transformation of Business, Democracy and Everyday Life*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2007 p. 176. See also Michel Chossudovsky's *The Globalization of Poverty and the New World Order*, Ibon Books, Quezon City, 2003. Chossudovsky wrote that the restructuring of global financial markets alongside the pillage of national economies has enabled the accumulation of vast amounts of private wealth—a large portion of

but the people are not. Adam Smith's invisible hand often becomes the invisible fist. The free market has other moral failings, too. It frequently does not protect people from the effects of economic activity, as when toxic material is spilled into the rivers and poisons people living downstream, or from the obesity epidemic and the rise of diabetes due to illogical decisions, irrational impulses, and compulsive choices. Poverty is about power and politics. Political systems have become marketplaces where votes and political influence are traded for economic benefits. For most politicians, private interests and re-election are paramount.

Free market capitalism has helped millions by increasing societal wealth and well-being and alleviating much suffering. It can produce things worked on by thousands of people and yet cost so little.¹⁴ John Maynard Keynes said capitalism is the best system for achieving a civilized economic society. However, it cannot provide full employment and leads to arbitrary and inequitable distribution of wealth.¹⁵ The prevailing myth is of unlimited economic growth. Still, for reasons of the common good and social justice, there have to be limits to the market because of the limits of human rationality. Interest-based determinism believes that people always act to maximize their material advantages. But people can easily be persuaded to buy things they do not need or would harm their self-interest. The market has always assumed that human beings make rational decisions when purchasing goods, unaware of what neuroscience has discovered—unconscious motives often cause people to act against their self-interest, such as when buying cigarettes and gorging on trans-fats.¹⁶ People left to their own devices do not always make choices that

which has been amassed as a result of strictly speculative transactions (p. 327). This economic order feeds on human misery and the destruction of the environment which in turn has resulted in the globalization of poverty.

¹⁴ William J. Bernstein has written a fascinating history of how trade and globalization evolved, how it contributed to the planet's bounty, stimulated intellectual progress and made human beings both prosperous and vulnerable. See *A Splendid Exchange: How Trade Shaped the World*, Atlantic Monthly Press, New York, 2008.

¹⁵ See Robert B. Reich, *Aftershock: The Next Economy and America's Future*, Alfred E. Knopf, New York, 2010, p. 29. Keynes also thought, according to Reich, that unless these two faults were corrected, capitalism would continue to be highly unstable, vulnerable to economic booms often followed by catastrophic collapses. Keynes concluded that the redistribution of incomes will raise consumption favorable to the growth of capital. Bello also wrote that in the Philippines, the narrowness of the market owing to massive income inequality is the fundamental structural problem, *The Anti-Development State*, p. 9.

¹⁶ See *Free Market Madness: Why Human Nature is at Odds with Economics—and Why it Matters*, by Peter A. Ubel, Harvard Business Press, 2009. Ubel claims that the free-market is not the perfect happiness-maximizer it is vaunted to be because humans are too easily manipulated by other humans, we are too easily seduced by our worst instincts, and we are too often overwhelmed by the many choices we face in the fast-moving market economies. See also *The Irrational*

redound to their own best interests and often fail to adequately anticipate the consequences of their choices in the long term. The market does not think of the long-term interests of people and ecosystems.¹⁷

The free market is not free. It bestows economic freedom only on those who have access to financial capital.¹⁸ Their money goes to ensure the maintenance of their privileges and competitive edge over their business rivals through contributions to political campaigns and hiring an army of lobbyists to influence lawmakers to craft policies favorable to their companies. Although many corporations are waving the green flag of environmentalism, they continue to wreak havoc on the environment. Nearly all large corporate chains are improving the energy efficiency of their lighting, heating, cooling, and refrigeration, improving the fuel efficiency of their vehicles, increasing recycling and composting, purchasing electricity from renewable resources, and taking other measures that save money and reduce waste.¹⁹ All this so far, however, is not making a significant difference in protecting the environment. Many corporations, if they can get away with it, will go on utilizing offshore tax havens to avoid paying taxes, export their toxic waste to poor countries, and maintain factories there that pay starvation wages and where human rights are not respected.²⁰ The free market does not focus on the needs of the poor,

Economist: Making Decisions in a Dangerous World, by Erwann Michel-Kerjan and Paul Slovic, eds., Public Affairs, New York, 2010. The articles confirm the findings of prior research that people often violate the assumptions of economic rationality and are guided mostly in their choices by noneconomic motives. They also discuss important developments in decision making that have happened in economics and other social sciences. Behavioral economists believe that we make irrational economic choices that are contrary to our own best interest. They propose a model which considers people's bias toward the present and the relative bias towards the future.

¹⁷ Nobel Prize winning economist Milton Friedman said that the business of business is to make a profit, not to engage in socially beneficial activities. See "The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase Profits," *New York Times Magazine*, September 13, 1970. He wrote that "there is one and only one social responsibility of business--to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud." Friedman thinks that there is a strong temptation to rationalize socially benevolent actions as an exercise of "social responsibility." He believes that this is one way for a corporation to generate goodwill as a by-product of expenditures that are entirely justified in its own self-interest. He argues that maximizing profits is a private end achieved through social means because it supports a society based on private property and free markets.

¹⁸ Stiglitz asserts in *The Price of Inequality* that in 2010, as the US struggled to emerge from a deep recession, the top 1% gained 93% of the additional income gained in the so-called recovery.

¹⁹ See Joel Markower, *Strategies for the Green Economy: Opportunities and Challenges in the New World of Business*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 2009.

²⁰ Douglas Rushkoff has traced the rise of corporations from being convenient legal fictions to being the dominant fact of contemporary life. See *Life Inc.: How the World Became a Corporation and How to Take it Back*, Random House, New York, 2009. The world, according to him, is

the implications of rampant injustice, or the catastrophic problems of ecosystems. The free market is interested in one thing: creating more money.

Free market capitalism has turned global - digital, web-based, and can find and make almost anything anywhere, propelled forward by new communications and transportation technologies like computers, fiber-optic cables, and container vans. This has resulted in widening inequalities of income and wealth, heightened job insecurity, and the growing devastation caused by global warming.²¹ Most nations have become part of an integrated global supply chain, and politics and economics have intertwined into an international political economy. The monopolization of big business is endemic to free market capitalism. It also has a fatal flaw—it is inherently unstable, as shown by the current financial crises gripping the global economy. Unrestricted free enterprise has produced horrible results in the past. David Korten says it is a failed economic system that does not consider the social and environmental costs of monetary profits.²²

The uneven development of the Philippine economy, where politics and the economy are controlled by a landed aristocracy and where financial resources are concentrated in the urban areas, is one of the reasons for the poverty of its people. Subsistence agriculture cannot absorb the rapidly expanding labor force because there is no significant land reform, and the economy remains feudal. And so, close to 300,000 people migrate to Manila each year. Land prices become exorbitant. And so also, the migrants often end up in one of the 415 squatter colonies in Metro Manila. They make up 44% of the population, citizens with no place to call their own, always living with the sword of demolition hanging above their heads day and night.

not only dominated by corporations but also inhabited by people who have internalized corporate values as their own, and the zero-sum logic of corporatist economics. By adopting the ethos of a speculative, abstract economic model as their own, people become disconnected from what matters to them the most, and engage in behavior destructive of their own and everyone else's welfare.

²¹ Reich claims in *Supercapitalism* that this has resulted in the weakening of democracy, whose rule is to determine the rules of the game whose outcomes express the common good and help achieve both profit and social justice. He says that instead of making corporations more socially responsible, who will do whatever is necessary to lure customers and satisfy investors, the better strategy for the common good is to make democracy work better (p. 182) through the creation of rules that balance the interests of consumers and investors with the broader interests of the public (p. 196).

²² *Agenda for a New Economy: From Phantom Wealth to Real Wealth*, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco, 2009, p. 5. He decries the spiritual and psychological costs of Wall Street culture that “celebrates greed, favors the emotionally and morally challenged with outsized compensation packages, and denies the human capacity for cooperation and sharing” (p. 45). This elitist economic ideology has led to the crippling of the economy, burdened the government with debilitating debts, divided the community into the profligate and the desperate, corrupted political institutions and threatened the destruction of the environment on which our very lives depend (p. 160).

Peasant families flock to the metropolis, only to join the swelling ranks of the unemployed. When large numbers of people are concentrated in a little piece of land, often subject to flooding and without essential infrastructure services, congestion and over-crowding are unavoidable. The squatter area then becomes another slum, one of those sprawling urban settlements filled with rancor and despair, hate and disease, dank alleys smelling of urine and excrement, and criminals and drug addicts terrorizing residents with threats of violence or murder.²³

It isn't easy to reconcile conscience with commerce and business ethics with the ecosystem. "It is therefore not enough to help the poor," Pope Francis said on Vatican Radio (May 25, 2013), "we must reform the system at the global level in a way that is consistent with the fundamental human dignity." According to him, the root causes of the current crisis are not only economic and financial but ethical and anthropological, where the idols of power, profit, and money are valued more than the human person. Pope Francis continued: "We must return to the centrality of man, to a more ethical view of business and human relations, without the fear of losing something." We have to move away from the corporate, oligarchic, global dominance of governments, economies, media, and, not least importantly, the military, all driven by the ideologies of consumerism, growth, and "progress" toward some new set of values and structures. We have to keep on trying out concepts that disrupt current structures and systems that have turned much of the world into one vast market. Progress is not a cellphone in every hand—it is when no Filipina is sold as a sex slave, and no more street children are roaming the streets of our cities.

The root cause of social problems in the Philippines is structural—the concentration of wealth at the top because the game is rigged in favor of the elite.²⁴ The benefits of economic growth are concentrated in the hands of a few hundred families, and they influence how the rules of the economic game are played. In controlling political power, they also shape the actions of the

²³ The United Nations broke down the definition of poverty thus: "1. Fundamentally, poverty is a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. 2. It means lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society. 3. It means not having enough to feed and cloth a family, not having a school or clinic to go to, not having the land on which to grow one's food or a job to earn one's living, not having access to credit. 4. It means insecurity, powerlessness, and exclusion of individuals, households, and communities. 5. It means susceptibility to violence. 6. And it often implies living on marginal or fragile environments, without access to clean water or sanitation."

²⁴ W. Bello wrote that corruption, cronyism, onerous terms of debt repayment and overpopulation might be significant causes, but the structural root of social problems is the massive income inequality in the Philippines. See *The Anti-Development State: The Political Economy of Permanent Crisis in the Philippines*, with H. Docena, M. de Guzman, and M. Malig (Manila: Anvil Publishing, 2009). The increasing inequality and social injustice are the main culprits.

government supposed to implement those rules, which have been tilted in favor of those who monopolize wealth and power.²⁵

Poverty saps people's self-control reserves, so social problems arise in its wake. Lack of money, rampant crime, and a degraded environment often exhaust the poorest of the poor. These factors weaken their self-control, so they think primarily about short-term benefits and immediate gratification—they beget more children, and the cycle begins again. Development is a more effective contraceptive because “when the future is looking up, spending more on the education of fewer children seems a better investment.”²⁶

Colonial history concentrated land ownership in the Philippines in the hands of a small percentage of the population, who accumulated vast wealth. They then run for office in the political arena. Most of these lawmakers and millionaires come from landed families. They then enact laws that protect their families' businesses, landholdings, and political clout. Corporations controlled by the elite make hefty campaign contributions during elections, let loose legions of lobbyists and pay off journalists to push through laws and rules that will help them maintain their privileged positions, and often hire goons to terrorize the voters. They have succeeded in blocking any meaningful land reform. More than 70% of the wealth in the Philippines is owned or controlled by a few hundred powerful families.

Debt service payments comprise 40% of the national budget, and only a pittance is left for social services. More than 40% of the annual budget of the Philippines goes to paying the interest on these loans to creditor countries and institutions. The government has little to spend on education and health care. The borrowed capital is not even touched. And there is very little to show for it. Most have been squirreled away in secret bank accounts abroad. The standing foreign debt was P16.31 trillion by the end of 2006, although the government had paid enormous sums in principal and interest from 1970 onwards.

William Easterly, in his book *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest have Done so Much Ill and So Little Good*,²⁷ documents

²⁵ Dante C. Simbulan wrote about the Philippine ruling elite in *The Modern Principalia: The Historical Evolution of the Philippine Ruling Oligarchy* (Quezon City, The University of the Philippines Press, 2005). Simbulan documents how they evolved in history, how their values shape their behavior, how they exploit the poverty and ignorance of the masses to hold on to political power, and what they do with that power to maintain their privileged positions.

²⁶ Guy Sorman, *Economics Does Not Lie* (Encounter Books, 2009), 169.

²⁷ William Easterly, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest have Done so Much Ill and So Little Good* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006). Easterly quotes a World Bank Report in 2000 which began with the confession: “Despite the billions of dollars spent on

how the \$ 2.3 trillion the West spent in foreign aid over five decades has not managed to get twelve-cent medicines to children to prevent malaria deaths, or get four-dollar bed nets to poor families, or to get three dollar vaccines to each new mother to prevent five million child deaths. Massive infrastructure development, like dams, irrigation projects, highways, mining operations, and power generation projects, often aided by international agencies, banks, and corporations in developed countries, frequently have devastating consequences on the country's natural resources and have tended to strengthen existing political and economic elites, with little benefit to those who need help the most.

Economics has to connect Mother Earth's cry with the poor's. Human beings are not above the things of the Earth but alongside them. The Market has been divinized because of greed.²⁸ The principle seems to be to strive for maximum profit with the least investment in the shortest possible time. As Francis Bacon said, we must "subjugate nature, press it into delivering its secrets, tie it to our service, and make it our slave." Earth is seen as an enemy to be subjugated and tamed. The Western commercial system would not work if the multinational corporations bore all the production costs, including whatever pollution, sickness, or damage to the ecosystem they caused in the countries they colonized. Since they did not integrate the cost of these into production, they destroyed the land, ruined the health of the people, poisoned streams and rivers, polluted aquifers and wells, crippled communities, and went home with huge profits. They became wealthy through the misfortune of others, a misfortune which they often caused.

The World Development Report of the World Bank said that the HDI score increased from 0.598 in 1990 to 0.699 in 2021 in the Philippines, keeping the country among the group with medium levels of human development. However, the government has not been able to redistribute new wealth created by economic growth. Most of the wealth is concentrated in a few urban areas. It is time to question economic and political systems that do not serve the interests of the more significant number of citizens, systems no longer beneficial to most people. Many of the problems in society are caused by or made worse by governments incapable of exercising authority over their people. Government institutions in the Philippines are mainly ill-equipped to tackle the essential tasks of education, security, and social welfare.

On the surface, the political system might be called democratic, but it is a matter of degree of government, not its form. The poor have to be the agents of their liberation – they have to work so that there can be effective political

development assistance each year, there is still very little known about the actual impact of projects on the poor." (p. 194) See the basic principles for helping the poor he enumerates on p. 382.

²⁸ See Harvey Cox, "The Market as God," *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 1999.

institutions for more excellent stability if democracy is the dominant political system.

In the context of the vast disparities in income between sectors of Philippine society and between nations, Laudato Si, as a social enterprise, aims to promote the common good and human values of Solidarity, Integrity, and Creativity by helping the poor take personal responsibility for a shared vision. Laudato Si was inspired by the *bayanihan* farming system in the Philippines, where neighbors would converge on one farm to plow it and then move on to the next the day after. This system is also used for planting, harvesting, and even moving houses from one place to another. The *Mondragon Corporacion Cooperatiba* also inspired Laudato Si in the Basque region in Spain, believed to be the largest and most successful cooperative in history. Mondragon expresses its philosophy of balancing human, business, and societal needs through its corporate values—cooperation, participation, social commitment, and innovation.

Inspiration was also had from the Economics of Communion of the Focolare. Laudato Si utilizes Catholic Social Teaching as the critical hermeneutic of economic activity.²⁹ I have also been invited to conferences on Business as Mission by Mats Tunehag, where I absorbed many ideas incorporated into the Laudato Si business philosophy. Businesses should be rooted in the community if not owned by the community members.³⁰ The network between the urban and the rural poor aims to restore the relationships of communities which are essential to their well-being and happiness.³¹

Laudato Si aspires to integrate the technological capability of the urban and rural poor (most of them have cell phones now) with their market needs and to advocate for the free sharing of market information and beneficial technology. This synthesis is a means for Laudato Si to help build relationships for justice and the common good through its triple bottom line—People, Planet,

²⁹ There have been several works about the public responsibility of business in organizing economic life. See, for example, *Rethinking the Purpose of Business: Interdisciplinary Essays from the Catholic Social Tradition*, S.A. Cortright and M. Naughton, eds., University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 2002; *Managing as if Faith Mattered: Christian Social Principles in the Modern Organization*, by H.J. Alford and M.J. Naughton, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 2006.

³⁰ See David Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2015); and *The Post-Corporate World* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2000).

³¹ King Jigme Singye Wangchuck of Bhutan introduced the use of the Gross National Happiness Index as a measure of wealth. See Arthur Brooks, *Gross National Happiness: Why Happiness Matters for America—and How We Can Get More of It*, 2010. A study by Ruut Veenhoven from the Erasmus University of Rotterdam compared the gross national happiness of 95 nations. The finding: the countries in which people claim that they are happy are the richest countries, with competitive economies and well-governed democratic institutions.

Prosperity. Financial profit is easy to measure. Laudato Si uses the Oxford Multidimensional Index of Poverty to measure progress in poverty reduction. Laudato Si is looking for measures for people and the planet to calculate its triple-bottom-line performance. Laudato Si puts purpose and passion above profit and defines business success as a more personally fulfilling and socially responsible life for its network members, the farmers and fishermen in the agricoops and the urban poor in the Laudato Si Consumers' Cooperative.

Laudato Si strengthens the building blocks of local communities and promotes sustainable agriculture so that economic activity can contribute to the well-being of people, communities, and the ecosystem. Laudato Si envisions an economic system that prioritizes creating better lives for everyone. The goal of politics and economics is to serve all of humanity, beginning with the poorest and most vulnerable wherever they may be, even in their mothers' womb, Pope Francis said in a letter to British Prime Minister David Cameron on June 16, 2013. All political and economic efforts and policies must be seen as the means, not the end, with the actual goal being the protection of the human person and well-being of all humanity, continued Pope Francis: "Every economic and political theory or action must set about providing each inhabitant of the planet with the minimum wherewithal to live in dignity and freedom, with the possibility of supporting a family, educating children, praising God and developing one's human potential."

In the light of its program "Climate Change and Food Security," these are the innovations for sustainability in its Climate-Smart Agriculture program that Laudato Si is promoting:

1. Agroforestry: Planting trees and bamboo in and around farms reduces soil erosion by providing a natural barrier against strong winds and rainfall. Tree roots also stabilize and nourish soils. Through the Farmer-Managed Natural Regeneration Method, Laudato Si encourages farmers to grow trees as windbreaks or as part of combined forage and livestock production, among other uses. Laudato Si is also engaged in the massive planting of bamboo seedlings in line with the government's plan to plant 2 million hectares of bamboo. In partnership with Mga Anak ni Inang Daigdig, plans are being drawn to create a bamboo tissue culture laboratory and an incubator hub where innovators can experiment and discuss bamboo-based businesses.

2. Soil management: The Department of Agriculture teaches organic farmers that alternating different crops allows soil periods of rest, restores nutrients, and controls pests. Soil amendments, such as biochar, help soils retain moisture near the surface by providing a direct source of water and nutrients to plant roots, even in times of drought. Using drones and sensors will significantly help the stakeholders of Laudato Si engaged in food production manage the soil they are tilling.

3. Increasing crop diversity: Monocropping often exposes crops to pests and diseases associated with overcrowding and can increase market dependence on a few varieties. Many species of indigenous fruit and vegetable varieties have vanished in favor of monocultured staples. Laudato Si believes encouraging diversity through agricultural subsidies and informed consumption choices can help reverse this trend and its threat to domestic food security.

4. Improving food production from existing livestock: Improved animal husbandry practices can increase milk and meat quantities without increasing herd sizes or causing environmental degradation. Organic farmers are taught to improve the quality of their feed by using grass, sorghum, and brans to produce more milk from fewer animals, reducing pressure on global corn supplies. Again, drones and sensors can help create healthier and faster-growing animals by analyzing humidity, temperature, and other crucial elements in animal husbandry.

5. Diversifying livestock breeds: Most commercial farming operations rely on a narrow range of commercial breeds selected for their high productivity and low input needs. Selective breeding, however, has also made these breeds vulnerable to diseases and changing environments. Indigenous livestock are often hardier and produce richer milk.

6. “Meatless Fridays”: Avoiding meat at least one day a week will reduce the environmental impacts associated with livestock and increase food availability in domestic and global markets. Current production methods require 7 kilos of grain and 100,000 liters of water for every kilogram of meat. Livestock production accounts for an estimated 18 percent of human-caused greenhouse gas emissions and roughly 23 percent of agricultural water use worldwide.

7. Raincatchments and more innovative irrigation systems: Almost half of commercial and residential irrigation water is wasted due to evaporation, wind, improper design, and overwatering. Installing water sensors or micro-irrigation technology and planning water-efficient gardens or farms using specific crops and locations can significantly reduce water scarcity problems in organic farms.

8. Integrated farming systems: Farming systems designed to be regenerative can improve soil fertility and agricultural productivity by using natural resources sustainably and efficiently. Laudato Si’s stakeholders will aggressively promote research and implementation of agrotechnology techniques, such as recycling wastewater or planting groups of plants that utilize the same resources in related ways.

9. Agroecological and organic farming: Organic and agroecological farming methods are designed to build soil quality and harmonize plant and animal health with local ecosystems. Research shows they can increase sustainable yield goals by 50 percent or more with relatively few external inputs. In contrast, genetic engineering occasionally increases output by 10 percent, often with unanticipated impacts on crop physiology and resistance.

10. Supporting small-scale farmers: Small-scale producers are affected more acutely by natural disasters and fluctuating commodity prices, even though they are more likely to be involved in food production. Laudato Si support services will be adjusted to alleviate this deficit. It also seeks increased government funding and support for agricultural research, development, and training programs that can help address hunger, malnutrition, and poverty without being compromised by corporate objectives.

Our humanity thrives when we choose higher goals and long-term objectives, think beyond our lifetimes, and even think of coming generations. Laudato Si takes a long-range view and risks short-term revenue to ensure long-term success and will continue to experiment and learn from mistakes. This kind of vision requires self-discipline and creativity to bring into being new things that did not exist before. It also does not punish failure since transformational initiatives are almost always the result of trial and error. Filipino culture should be transformed to become less averse and more creative and entrepreneurial so Filipinos can achieve their full potential. Their dreams should lead them to believe that a better nation and world are possible.

Laudato Si aims to become a social disruptor, transforming the whole market equilibrium in its areas of operations nationwide. Strategic decisions from the right vision must support business planning and innovation with constant attention to the fundamentals to achieve this. In encouraging creativity, Laudato Si has learned not to try to do too much too soon with too few resources. Also, we should not overestimate the ease with which the e-trading network's objectives can be achieved and underestimate the resources (time, people, money) required to achieve the goal of social, economic, and environmental transformation.

Once a product has been chosen to be marketed or produced, Laudato Si, through its e-commerce platform, gets it to market fast, allocates more resources, rallies everyone behind the marketing strategy, eliminates all potential speed bumps, and gets everyone on the required timeline. Then, the work practices, process flow, and structure of Laudato Si to execute strategic goals effectively and efficiently are aligned in the light of its vision of what it aspires for. This vision helps create processes that deepen meaning, a spirit that makes people care about making Laudato Si's vision a reality. The vision is reinforced constantly and creatively—the stakeholders must continually look for compelling metaphors and images to describe the vision actively. Every leader must know the importance of speaking so that people can see and feel the future and see and feel themselves thriving in it.

The Laudato Si vision requires systemic change in the institutions that shape markets. Helping farmers produce more food without providing serious

support (such as tools for measuring maturity before harvest, tools and containers for post-harvest activities, sorting and grading, cost-effective methods for storage or processing of surplus, access to distant markets, market information regarding prices and consumer demand, and other critical factors) will most likely lead to even more post-harvest losses. Laudato Si aims to figure out how to assist farmers, traders, and marketers with these kinds of value chain supports so that producing more organic food will lead to increased incomes, and there will be more incentive for farmers to produce more organic food which will lower prices, which will enable more people to eat healthy food. The Bureau of Plant Industry of the Department of Agriculture recently donated a refurbished 20-ft container van with LED lights and an aquaponics system so that the people in Smokey Mountain can produce high-value crops in confined spaces in blighted areas. We hope to replicate this project with stacked container vans in slum areas in the urban centers.

Financial technology is needed to help market-based entrepreneurial solutions achieve their social and market potential and meet the needs of millions of Filipinos effectively, equitably, and sustainably. Vast new markets must be created, financed, and regulated nationwide. This requires intense creativity and innovation, so Laudato Si values and promotes imagination, trust, and happiness among the members more than traditional economic measures like efficiency, budgets, technology, or return on investment—social capital over financial capital. Laudato Si aims to promote a creative economy where managers and creatives collaborate to foster innovation and economic value.

The Laudato Si e-TN provides economic incentives that favor recovery and recycling rather than extraction and exploitation of resources through creative economic enterprises that will spring from the people's imagination, innovation, discipline, hard work, collaboration, and intelligence. Laudato Si also incorporates ecological costs on things produced and reminds stakeholders constantly to be mindful of the needs of future generations. Laudato Si asks the poor directly about what they consider 'impact' and 'progress' instead of developing top-down indicators and measurements.

Poverty is caused by the trampling of human rights and lack of access to social, political, and economic power and resources, together with the inability to make choices about food, health, and education. Sustainable product innovations must safeguard sustainable development as a right and a guarantee for fairness. An economics of creativity understands and implements strategies of development low on carbon emissions in the light of eco-justice and one that favors the poor. We have to leave behind paradigms of unsustainable development based on fossil fuels and the belief that the human being is the center of the universe.

The *Laudato Si* e-TN joins the call for wealthy nations to reduce their carbon emissions drastically to maintain global warming below 2 degrees and reduce emissions by 25-40% by 2020 based on 1990 levels. This calls for more significant innovation and creativity. Adopting low-carbon emission strategies by developed countries should also provide the necessary technology transfer and financial aid to developing nations moving towards ecological economics. These global efforts should be based on the human right to development and the reduction and eradication of poverty. The processes and decisions must include the full participation of the poor, who are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, in a clear, participatory, and transparent manner. International development goals will succeed only if every human has the right and the power to live with dignity.

The signing of the Sustainable Development Goals was a historic commitment by the international community to overcome poverty and injustice. If the SDGs do not fall short of people's expectations again, they must address the complexity of global politics and economics and clearly understand human dignity. An economics of creativity must develop a new framework for development that reflects the interconnectedness of global processes and the divergencies of worldviews.

An Economics of Creativity fosters the production and marketing of goods resilient to climate change. It favors the poor with reduced carbon emissions in an integral, ecological economics that is not fragmented and isolated from natural processes. The LSe-TN is helping do this by introducing climate-smart, technology-driven agri-ecological methods and streamlining the marketing system to cut carbon emissions among the urban and rural poor and the Indigenous peoples, moving towards a vision of development that is inclusive, just, and sustainable. Following the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, *Laudato Si* sees sustainability according to the social, economic, and ecological dimensions. The economy of convergence must become an Economy of Living Systems.

Inter-Creationality among the Community of Beings: An Interreligious and Cosmological Perspective

Anthony Le Duc, SVD

Reimagining Community

In his satirical novel *Small Gods*, Terry Pratchett wryly critiques anthropocentric assumptions through a deceptively simple question: “Does a falling tree in the forest make a sound when there is no one to hear it?”¹ His answer—there is always “someone” in the forest, whether a badger, a squirrel, or “millions of small gods”—subtly reminds us that the world is never devoid of observers or participants. The forest, like the wider cosmos, is not an empty stage awaiting human perception but a vibrant, relational space teeming with sentient and even sacred presences. Pratchett’s humorous quip challenges the reductionist view that awareness and meaning are confined to human consciousness, inviting instead a deeper reflection on the interconnectedness and vitality of all beings.

This essay proposes the paradigm of inter-creationality as a way of understanding and reimagining the relationships among all entities in the cosmos—human, non-human, and inanimate. Inter-creationality is a theological and ethical paradigm that affirms the intrinsic interconnectedness, mutual interdependence, and shared moral value of all created beings within a dynamic cosmic community. Rooted in diverse religious and philosophical worldviews, it recognizes the cosmos as a relational whole where every being contributes to and participates in the flourishing of all. It also calls for moral virtues such as

¹ Terry Pratchett, *Small Gods* (HarperCollins e-books, 1994), 2.

gentleness, compassion, moderation, gratitude, and reciprocity to guide human interaction with the rest of the community of creation. It challenges dominant human chauvinistic worldviews, especially those shaped by Enlightenment rationalism, that regard nature as passive, fragmented, and utilitarian. By contrast, this outlook emphasizes the cosmos as a community of beings, animated by relationality and grounded in reciprocal care.

While the term creation carries theological connotations most explicitly in the Abrahamic traditions, this study adopts an inclusive understanding that encompasses all beings—sentient or not—as contingent and interconnected, whether their origins are understood as theistic, cosmological, or cyclical. Even religious traditions that view the world as eternal, such as some schools of Buddhism or Hinduism, affirm the origination and interdependence of beings within that continuum. Within this broadened theological and philosophical context, creation is not merely a doctrinal category but a relational condition, marking beings not by their genesis alone but by their embeddedness within a larger whole.

This inclusive use of “creation” is not without precedent in interreligious discourse. For instance, the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders—comprising representatives from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and other religions of India²—adopted the term in its 2022 declaration “10 Spiritual Principles for Climate Repentance.”³ In that document, “creation” is used interchangeably with “nature,” and humans are described not as masters over creation but as participants within it—called to humility, gratitude, and care. One principle states, “Within creation, and between humans and other parts of creation, as well as among religious communities, there is interdependence... each element both receives and gives influence, impact, love, and growth.”

This essay seeks to deepen that vision by engaging religious and philosophical insights from some of the major faith traditions. These spiritual systems, while differing in cosmology and doctrine, each offer ethical and spiritual resources for rethinking our place in the web of existence. This study argues that inter-creationality functions as both a theological orientation and an ethical imperative—one that challenges us to move beyond domination, beyond stewardship, even beyond sustainability, toward mutual flourishing. In a time of ecological crisis and spiritual fragmentation, reimagining the world as a sacred and dynamic community of beings is not just an intellectual exercise—it is a moral and existential necessity.

² The Elijah Interfaith Institute, “The Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders,” <https://elijah-interfaith.org/about-elijah/the-elijah-board-of-world-religious-leaders>.

³ The Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders, “10 Spiritual Principles for Climate Repentance,” <https://climaterpentance.com/the-spiritual-principles/>

Religious Foundations for Inter-Creationality

In this section, we present the fundamental religious principles that support the paradigm of inter-creationality. It must be stated that the term ‘creation’ refers to both human and nonhuman entities within the cosmos. However, for the sake of brevity, in this paper, I will employ the term ‘human’ to refer to human creation and ‘creation’ to refer to nonhuman creation. In other places, nonhuman creation will be referred to as nature. This usage is only for the sake of convention and does not imply that humans are somehow removed from or not a part of creation or the natural order.

Buddhism

In Theravada Buddhist cosmology, all beings live within a vast universe (*loka*) made up of six realms, each with different levels of suffering. The lowest of these is the hell realm, where those who have done great evil in their lives are reborn. It is a place of intense pain, with fire, ice, and many forms of suffering caused by the weight of negative actions (*kamma/karma*).⁴ To avoid being reborn in this realm, people are encouraged to follow the path of the Buddha by diligently practicing mindfulness, living ethically, and developing wisdom. Through these efforts, they can purify their *kamma* and move toward a better life and spiritual freedom.

At the opposite end of the cycle of existence (*samsāra*) lies the heavenly realm—the most elevated and joyful among the six realms in Theravāda Buddhist cosmology. This realm serves as a temporary abode of bliss attained by individuals, including laypersons, who have lived ethically and cultivating great virtues.⁵ Through the accumulation of *merit* from their virtuous conduct, they are reborn into this realm. Time is experienced differently here—one day in the highest heaven is said to equal 1,600 years on Earth.

Despite its serenity and delight, the heavenly realm remains impermanent.⁶ Buddhist teachings say that no state within *samsāra* offers ultimate or lasting happiness. When the merit sustaining a being’s presence in this realm is exhausted, they will inevitably be reborn into another realm. Unlike certain Christian conceptions of eternal heaven or hell, Buddhist cosmology views all realms as transient. Even beings in heaven and hell remain bound to the

⁴ Punnadhammo Mahāthero, *The Buddhist Cosmos: A Comprehensive Survey of the Early Buddhist Worldview* (Canada: Arrow River Forest Hermitage, 2018), 99.

⁵ Roderick S. Bucknell, *Reconstructing Early Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 261.

⁶ Punnadhammo Mahāthero, *The Buddhist Cosmos*, 315.

continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, interconnected with all other forms of life in the cosmic order.

Human beings dwell in the realm positioned between animals and demi-gods within the six-fold cycle of existence. These realms are interconnected, allowing beings to move between them based on their actions. Those in lower realms of suffering may gradually accumulate enough merit to be reborn into more favorable conditions, while those enjoying the pleasures of heaven will eventually exhaust their merit and return—often to the human realm—before they can attain final liberation. Likewise, human beings who engage in immoral acts can quickly generate negative *kamma* and fall into one of the lower realms of existence. In this view, your favorite pet dog may once have been a human—or may become one in a future life—illustrating the fluid and interconnected nature of all beings in the cycle of rebirth. This vision of reality highlights a central Buddhist insight: human and non-human beings are not separate or isolated, but deeply entwined in a shared journey through *samsāra*. Humans and animals, for example, not only face similar conditions of impermanence and vulnerability but also inhabit the same physical world. All sentient beings strive for release from suffering and seek lasting peace, making the human journey part of a broader, collective path.

Among all realms, the human state holds special importance. It is uniquely suited for spiritual progress because humans possess the ability to reflect, choose, and act ethically. Through mindfulness, insight, and the cultivation of compassion and wisdom, humans can break free from the cycle of rebirth. This capacity for self-awareness and moral growth marks the human realm as a precious opportunity—one not to be taken for granted. The human experience also offers a valuable balance between pleasure and pain. Unlike the extremes of other realms, life in the human realm provides just enough suffering to motivate spiritual growth and just enough comfort to sustain the effort. This balance prompts reflection on the fleeting nature of worldly pleasures and inspires the desire for lasting liberation.

In this grand web of existence, all sentient beings face common challenges and aspirations. As humans, our ability to reason, choose, and act ethically gives us a unique role: to bridge the gap between suffering and liberation—not only for ourselves, but for all beings. Through our experiences of joy and sorrow, we develop empathy and solidarity with other beings. Indeed, the heart of Buddhist moral training lies in helping individuals move beyond personal suffering and self-interest.⁷ It calls us to ground our actions in universal empathy—recognizing that the pain of any sentient being is reason enough for

⁷ John J. Holder, “A Suffering (but Not Irreparable) Nature: Environmental Ethics from the Perspective of Early Buddhism,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 8, no. 2 (2007): 123.

compassionate response. As we embrace this vision, we begin to see the deep interconnection that unites all life, breaking down the illusion of separation and nurturing genuine care for others. In this shared reality, we are called to be agents of compassion—bridging the divides not only between different realms of existence but also within our own human society. Our lives, shaped by both joy and sorrow, become the foundation for developing empathy. With open hearts and minds, we are invited to turn our experiences into a commitment to ethical living—one that honors the suffering and dignity of all beings.

Confucianism

The idea of a shared bond between humans and non-human creation is not only central to Buddhism but also deeply rooted in Chinese religious thought, particularly Confucianism. Although Confucianism presents a distinct world-view, its cosmology affirms the interconnectedness of all beings through a vital force known as *qi*. This life energy animates and sustains everything—humans, animals, plants, mountains, rivers, and even inanimate objects. *Qi* is also the essence of natural elements such as air, earth, fire, and water. The Chinese character for *qi* evokes the image of steam rising from rice, symbolizing nourishment, transformation, and flow. In human beings, *qi* harmonizes body and spirit by uniting mind and heart into an integrated whole.⁸ This holistic view breaks down dualisms—between humans and nature, body and mind, matter and energy—affirming the unity and interdependence of all things.⁹

In classical Confucian thought, *qi* connects the cosmos and humanity and serves as the animating force of both nature and human life. Neo-Confucian philosophers later expanded this idea, recognizing *qi* as the underlying essence of all living things and identifying its presence across both material and energetic dimensions of the universe. From this perspective, the cosmos is composed of layered realms structured and sustained by *qi*.¹⁰ The dynamic function of *qi* is inseparable from the interaction of *yin* and *yang*—complementary forces that shape all existence. Their continuous interplay governs both natural and social phenomena, from the movement of the stars to human emotions. The balance between these opposites—light and dark, active and passive, high and low—generates transformation and maintains harmony in

⁸ Mary Evelyn Tucker, “Confucian Cosmology and Ecological Ethics,” in *Living Earth Community: Multiple Ways of Being and Knowing*, ed. Sam Mickey, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2020), 111.

⁹ Tucker, “Confucian Cosmology and Ecological Ethics,” 111.

¹⁰ Nicholas S. Brasovan, *Neo-Confucian Ecological Humanism* (Albany, SUNY Press, 2017), 57.

the universe. This ongoing process of change and interrelation reveals the profound continuity at the heart of all existence.¹¹

In Chinese cosmology, *qi* operates through the dynamic interactions of the *Wu Xing*, also known as the Five Phases or elemental processes: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. Each phase embodies specific qualities: wood (growth), fire (transformation), earth (stability), metal (clarity), and water (adaptability). These are not static substances but dynamic forces that interact in cycles of creation and transformation, shaping both the physical world and human life. The Five Phases influence everything from natural patterns to moral development, and they metaphorically represent tastes, emotions, seasons, and virtues. Importantly, these elements are not seen as separate entities, but as expressions or stages of the life force (*qi*) in motion.¹²

While the precise relationship between *qi* and the Five Phases has been debated, their interplay is generally understood to govern the processes of growth, change, and renewal throughout the universe. This interaction influences the rhythms of nature, the movements of celestial bodies, and the health of human life. Maintaining a balance among these elements is essential for individual well-being and ecological harmony. Although these ideas originated in early Chinese history, particularly during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), Confucian scholars took a particular interest in utilizing these natural philosophical concepts in order to apply to concerns of personal and social ethics.¹³

Confucian cosmology thus reveals a deep interconnectedness between humans and the universe. Recognizing this connection encourages us to live in harmony with the natural world, understanding that our well-being is intimately tied to the balance of *qi* in nature. When this balance is maintained, vitality flourishes; when disrupted, suffering and disorder follow. This worldview underscores the ethical responsibility to foster harmony in all our relationships—with people, nature, and even inanimate things. It reminds us of the ripple effects of our actions, influencing the well-being of ourselves and the cosmos. Self-cultivation becomes crucial in aligning our conduct with the patterns of nature and helps to facilitate the unobstructed flow of *qi* and maintaining order in the universe.

This perspective also affirms a profound kinship between humans and the “ten thousand things” of the universe. Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhang Zai (Chang Tsai) expressed this in his *Western Inscription*: “Heaven is my father

¹¹ Brasovan, *Neo-Confucian Ecological Humanism*, 17.

¹² John H. Berthrong and Evelyn Nagai Berthrong, *Confucianism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 61.

¹³ Berthrong and Berthrong, *Confucianism*, 89.

and earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore, that which extends throughout the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters and all things are my companions.”¹⁴ Zhang’s words reflect a deeply relational cosmology in which ethical conduct arises naturally from the awareness of shared existence with all beings. He concluded, “In life I follow and serve [Heaven and Earth]. In death I will be at peace.”

Ultimately, Confucian teachings emphasize living in accordance with nature through ethical behavior, respect for life, and sustainable practices that promote the flourishing of both humanity and the environment. Since humans share the same life force as the natural world, they can interpret natural phenomena to understand their own lives and moral responsibilities. Historically, Chinese rulers observed signs in nature to assess their alignment with the Mandate of Heaven—a principle linking just governance with cosmic order. This mandate is not discovered externally but discerned through self-cultivation and attentive observation of both one’s inner nature and the surrounding world.¹⁵ In this way, Confucian cosmology and ethics offer a holistic vision: that human destiny is revealed through our relationship with the rhythms and signs of the living universe.¹⁶

Abrahamic Traditions

The concept of inter-creationality within the Abrahamic religions emerges from the fundamental belief that all things in existence find their origin in God. The Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible emphatically affirms that God commanded the universe to come into existence *ex nihilo*. In other words, God *spoke* all of creation into being. The Qur’an frequently presents the natural world as a collection of “*ayat*” (آيات), or signs, meticulously crafted by God, the ultimate Creator (Qur’an 2:164; 6:99; 30:20-25). Indeed, a significant portion of the Qur’an’s over 6,000 verses delves into various natural phenomena, from the intricate details of plant life and the diversity of animal species (Qur’an 16:10-11; 16:68-69) to the grandeur of mountains, seas, stars, and the sun (Qur’an 13:2-3; 36:38-40). Throughout these verses, God repeatedly calls upon humanity to deeply reflect upon these divine signs embedded

¹⁴ William Theodore de Bary, Irene Bloom, and Joseph Adler, *Sources of Chinese Tradition, Volume 1* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 524.

¹⁵ Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 46.

¹⁶ Anthony Le Duc, “Becoming Human, Intercultural, and Inter-creational: Movements toward Achieving Ecoflourishing,” in *Ecoflourishing and Virtue Christian Perspectives Across the Disciplines*, ed. Steven Bouma-Prediger, Nathan Carson (UK: Routledge, 2024), 179-190.

within creation (Qur'an 10:5-6; 45:3-5). This invitation to contemplation underscores the understanding that all aspects of creation serve as powerful evidence of God's existence, power, wisdom, and oneness. They firmly establish God as the singular source and sustainer of all that exists.

This theological principle holds immense significance, for it affirms that the universe is not a mere result of chance or happenstance, but rather a purposeful act of divine creation. The notion of creation inherently carries profound implications of meaning, purpose, and order within the universe. According to Pope Francis, the word 'creation' points to "God's loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance."¹⁷ Rather than something to be studied and controlled, "creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion."¹⁸ Francis asserted that seeing creation as 'nature' may inadvertently reinforce a technocratic paradigm that reduces the natural world to an object of manipulation and control. This perpetuates a dualistic relationship of dominance rather than acknowledging humanity as an integral part of a divinely ordained cosmic system.

The Judeo-Christian tradition gives further support to the notion of intercreationality by affirming that all of creation is imbued with divinely bestowed intrinsic goodness and value. This was affirmed by various Church Fathers as well as Thomas Aquinas when they reflected on God's myriad creation. Augustine of Hippo declared that all that God created in the universe "both great and small, celestial and terrestrial, spiritual, and corporeal" are good.¹⁹ Inspired by the account of creation in the book of Genesis, Augustine asserted that whether it be a human, an ape, a mountain, a farm, the air, or the heaven with its celestial bodies, each is good accordingly. John Chrysostom shared Augustine's sentiments and argued that since God had already deemed every creature to be good, anyone who harbored a contradictory thought would be committing an "arrogant folly."²⁰

Admittedly, among God's creation, not everything is pleasant or beneficial to human life. Indeed, "Among the growth springing up from the earth it was not only plants that are useful but also those that are harmful, and not only trees that bear fruit but also those that bear none; and not only tame animals

¹⁷ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, no. 76.

¹⁸ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 76.

¹⁹ Jame Schaeffer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 18.

²⁰ Schaeffer, *Theological Foundations*, 19.

but also wild and unruly ones.”²¹ However, the goodness of a creature does not hinge on human evaluation. Thus, any condescending utterance about the creatures which God has created, said Chrysostom, demonstrates disrespect and ingra-titude to their Creator. Similarly, Thomas Aquinas, following in the footsteps of the Church Fathers, emphasized that the ultimate source of a creature’s goodness is God, who willed its existence. Aquinas taught that each creature pos-sesses its own inherent perfection, instilled by God. Merely by existing and functioning in accordance with its divinely bestowed nature, it demonstrates its intrinsic value. Therefore, criticizing a creature for its inherent nature or way of being amounts to an insult directed at its very Creator.²²

In this God-centered worldview, the artificial division between humans and non-human creation dissolves, replaced by a portrayal of all of God’s creation existing in intimate connection with one another, and thus enable the possibility of inter-creationality. This paradigm starts with the understanding that human and nonhuman creation are members of the community of creation. In her book *Ask the Beast*, Elizabeth Johnson asserted that the notion of community of creation is “based on the understanding that humans and other living beings, for all their differences, form one community woven together by the common thread of having been created by God.”²³ According to Johnson, this vision of community of creation can be found in the Book of Job of the Hebrew Bible, which considerably challenges human arrogance as well as redefines humanity’s place in the universe.

Through God’s speech from the whirlwind (Job 38–41), the writer calls attention to the majesty, autonomy, and mystery of creation, reminding the reader that humans are neither at the center nor in control of the created order. Instead, wild animals, cosmic elements, and even mythical beasts exist independently of human purposes.²⁴ From its beginning to its ultimate purpose, all of creation is rooted in the love and creative power of God. Nothing in the world, whether living beings or cosmic elements, moves and have their being outside the sustaining presence of the Creator. In other words, every form of life—human beings included—is a creature dependent on God.²⁵ The shared creaturely status forming the vision of a community of creation counters the long-held and destructive notion of human superiority and dominion over nature.²⁶

²¹ Schaeffer, 19.

²² Schaeffer, 19–20.

²³ Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beast: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 261.

²⁴ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 269–273.

²⁵ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 267–268.

²⁶ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 267.

Elizabeth Johnson remarked:

Widespread in prophets, psalms, and wisdom writings, this paradigm positions humans not above but within the living world which has its own relationship to God accompanied by a divinely-given mandate to thrive. Refashioning the idea of human relation to the natural world along these lines not only provides a context for a non-negotiably responsible retrieval of dominion but also opens the imagination to multiple avenues of reciprocal interaction between human beings and other species. Broadening the terms of our own identity in light of the reality of others, we end up seeing, thinking, and acting differently.²⁷

The notion of community of creation can also be supported by the Qur'an. One of the clearest expressions of this vision appears in the Qur'an in the use of the term *umma*—commonly used to describe a religious community of believers—to refer to nonhuman beings: “There is no creature on earth nor bird that flies with its wings but are *ummam* like you. We have not neglected anything in the Book; then to their Lord they will be gathered” (Qur'an 6:38).

By situating animals and birds as *communities* with their own integrity and divine purpose, the Qur'an draws a parallel between the social structure of humans and nonhuman creatures. Within God's created order, there are communities beyond human communities that exist and are sustained by God. Therefore, all creatures are co-members of a divine ecology grounded in mutual belonging and accountability before God. One can conclude that in the divine ecology, the community of creation is in fact a community of communities.

Virtues Undergirding Inter-Creationality

From the insights provided by the various systems of religious thought in the above section, we can summarize ‘inter-creationality’ as the concept that stresses the interconnectedness and interdependence of all entities in the cosmos. It recognizes the shared bond among all forms of beings—biotic and abiotic—encompassing humans, animals, plants, other beings, and even inanimate objects. It affirms that non-human creation constitutes an essential aspect of the primary set of relationships of human life. It also underscores the significance of acknowledging the collective aspiration for flourishing. Thus, from the ethical perspective, inter-creationality calls for moral behavior on the part of human beings, fostering solidarity, empathy, compassion, mutuality, and a sense of responsibility for the well-being of the entire creation.

²⁷ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 267.

Having established the conceptual framework of inter-creationality, our focus now shifts toward exploring its manifestation through moral virtues that govern the intricate bond within the community of creation. It is important to note that this enumeration does not strive to be comprehensive but rather aims to highlight essential and representative virtues that uphold inter-creationality and facilitate the dynamics inherent in this interrelationship.

Gentleness

As a foundational virtue for inter-creationality, gentleness offers a vital orientation in how humans relate to non-human beings. It is closely connected to the principle of *ahimsā* (nonviolence), which is central to several Indian religious traditions—particularly Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism. While all these traditions uphold *ahimsā*, Jainism is especially notable for its radical and all-encompassing interpretation. In Jain thought, every living being—regardless of size or form—possesses a soul (*jīva*) and some degree of consciousness. This awareness even extends to certain non-living entities believed to contain subtle forms of life. Accordingly, Jains strive to minimize harm in all aspects of life. This commitment is expressed in a strict vegetarian diet and daily mindfulness about the potential harm caused to microscopic organisms in the air, water, and earth. Responsibility for such harm is not dismissed but acknowledged with humility and care.²⁸

One of the most striking expressions of *ahimsā* in Jainism is the ascetic practice of voluntary death through fasting (*sallekhanā*). This practice is not seen as suicide but as the ultimate act of detachment and compassion—an intentional, peaceful exit from mundane life that avoids harming any living being. It is reserved for those who have achieved great spiritual maturity and is revered as a path toward liberation (*moksha*), demonstrating the depth of Jain commitment to nonviolence.²⁹

In Buddhism, *ahimsā* also holds a central place as the first of the Five Precepts, which explicitly forbids intentional harm to any sentient being. The *Dhammapada* teaches that just as we fear pain and cherish life, so do all beings (Dp. 129–130). Therefore, to cause suffering is morally indefensible. Gentleness, in this context, is cultivated not only in relationships with humans and animals but also in ethical livelihood; Buddhist teachings discourage any occupation that causes harm (AN V.177; Thera. 242–243).

While Buddhist nonviolence focuses on sentient beings, its deeper implications invite a gentler approach to all forms of existence. A person who is

²⁸ Jeffery D. Long, *Jainism: An Introduction* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 100.

²⁹ Long, *Jainism*, 110.

truly gentle in spirit would not treat animals with care while casually damaging plants or natural features like trees, rocks, or rivers. Gentleness becomes an attitude that shapes how we interact with the entire community of beings. Thus, gentleness builds upon *ahimsā* and extends it. If *ahimsā* establishes the ethical boundary—“do no harm”—then gentleness represents the positive expression of that principle. It is not only about refraining from violence but about cultivating tenderness, kindness, patience, and compassionate action. If *ahimsā* is the protective fence, gentleness is the flourishing garden within it. Through kind speech, helpful behavior, and attentive care, gentleness transforms nonviolence from a passive ideal into an active way of being. It is through this virtue that one truly embodies the spirit of inter-creationality—recognizing all beings as worthy of care and building relationships rooted in peace, respect, and mutual flourishing.

In Christianity, as in many Indian religious traditions, gentleness is a highly esteemed virtue. It is listed among the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23) and is repeatedly emphasized throughout the New Testament. Jesus himself declared, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5), and described his own nature as “gentle and humble in heart” (Matt. 11:29). Far from weakness, gentleness in Christian teaching is a form of tender strength, grounded in humility and compassion. The Apostle Paul encouraged believers to “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Col. 3:12), urging the Christian community to practice gentleness as a defining mark of discipleship. Christian leaders are likewise expected to embody this virtue, especially in their guidance of others (2 Tim. 2:24–25; 3:3). For theologians like Thomas Aquinas, gentleness—often associated with *mansuetudo*—is one of the cardinal moral virtues, while Augustine described it as the “art of self-mastery,” a quality often neglected in a world driven by force and domination.

In today’s context, marked by environmental degradation and social violence, gentleness remains an essential virtue—not only for human relationships but also for our relationship with creation. A truly gentle person is attentive to the consequences of their actions, seeking to avoid harm not just to people but to all living beings. As Mahatma Gandhi observed, “The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.”³⁰ Gentleness, in this light, becomes a moral indication of ecological responsibility. Practicing gentleness leads us to live more mindfully and harmoniously within the community of creation. It challenges destructive behaviors such as overconsumption, hunting, and deforestation, which

³⁰ Peta, “PETA Honors Gandhi’s Lifelong Commitment to Animal Liberation,” <https://www.peta.org/features/gandhi/>

contribute to biodiversity loss and ecological imbalance. Gentleness prompts us to not only ‘preserve’ forests or ‘prevent’ species from extinction but to nurture and restore the natural world so that a harmonious and symbiotic relationship between humans and creation can be promoted. In embodying gentleness, we demonstrate our commitment to solidarity with sentient beings by creating conditions that support their flourishing and well-being.

More than a personal virtue, gentleness calls us to a broader ethical responsibility—one that acknowledges the interconnectedness of all life. As naturalist John Muir eloquently wrote, “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.”³¹ Through this lens, gentle-ness functions not as passive sentiment, but as a transformative force that can be deployed for cultivating peace, practicing empathy, and sustaining the health and harmony of our common home.

Compassion

Another essential virtue that supports the paradigm of inter-creationality is compassion. Rooted in empathy—the ability to recognize, understand, and share the feelings of others—compassion involves both emotional resonance and the desire to alleviate suffering for others.³² While commonly understood within the human context as kindness toward those who suffer, in the framework of inter-creationality, compassion expands to embrace all beings who share in the fragile, vulnerable condition of existence. In Buddhism, compassion is closely linked to *mettā*, or loving-kindness. Together, they form part of the Four Sublime Abodes, along with sympathetic joy and equanimity. Loving-kindness is the aspiration that all beings be happy, while compassion is the heartfelt desire to alleviate their suffering. These virtues are to be extended universally—to the strong and the weak, the near and the far, the seen and the unseen—without exception or ill will (AN I.183). Even in adversity, individuals are instructed to practice loving-kindness without anger or resentment (MN I.123).

Compassion is not merely a fleeting emotional response; it is a profound spiritual disposition. It arises from deep empathy and expresses itself in the desire to help. The Buddha himself is described as “the one person who arises in the world... out of compassion for the world” (AN I.23), whose mission to spread the *dhamma* was born “simply out of sympathy and compassion for living beings” (AN II.177).

³¹ John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 166.

³² Jacinta Jiménez, “Compassion vs. empathy: Understanding the Difference,” BetterUp, July 16, 2021, <https://www.betterup.com/blog/compassion-vs-empathy#:~:text=Consider%20these%20definitions%3A,creates%20a%20desire%20to%20help>.

The cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion has transformative potential—not only for personal moral development but also for society and the environment. Both monastics and laypeople are encouraged to nurture these qualities, with the aim of extending their influence beyond the boundaries of family, community, or species.³³ As Nyanaponika Thera wrote, in a world burdened by suffering and self-centeredness, “it is compassion that removes the heavy bar, opens the door to freedom, makes the narrow heart as wide as the world. Compassion takes away from the heart the inert weight, the paralyzing heaviness; it gives wings to those who cling to the lowlands of self.”³⁴

Applied ecologically, the implications of compassion are profound. To embody compassion within an inter-creational framework is to approach all forms of life—and the ecosystems that support them—with care and concern. Selective compassion is not enough; a truly compassionate person extends their care to all sentient beings and to the non-sentient environment that sustains life. This integrated practice of compassion reflects a high ethical commitment to the flourishing of the whole community of creation.³⁵

In Confucianism, the virtue closest to compassion is *ren* (仁), often translated as benevolence, humanity, or kindness. *Ren* is the core of Confucian ethics, emphasizing empathy, respect, and moral responsibility toward others. According to Mencius, one of Confucius’s key successors, people are born with innate ‘sprouts’ of virtue, one of which is compassion. Like a seed that needs sunlight, water, and soil, compassion must be nurtured through a thorough education, example, and diligent practice. In this view, cultivating *ren* leads to a harmonious society grounded in respect, dignity, and social responsibility.

While traditional Confucianism focuses primarily on human relationships,³⁶ later thinkers extended this moral concern to the non-human world. Mencius wrote that the virtuous person “is benevolent toward people” and “feels love for all things.”³⁷ Wang Yangming (1472–1529) deepened this view by asserting the unity of humans and the cosmos. He argued that the benevolent heart connects with all beings, and that true morality arises from the ability to empathize with the suffering of people, animals, and even the

³³ Pragati Sahni, *Environmental Ethics in Buddhism: A Virtues Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 120.

³⁴ Nyanaponika Thera, “The Four Sublime States: Contemplations on Love, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy and Equanimity,” *Access to Insight*, 1994, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/wheel006.html>.

³⁵ Simon P. James, “Against Holism: Rethinking Buddhist Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Values* 16, no. 4 (2007): 457.

³⁶ Xinzhong Yao, “An Eco-Ethical Interpretation of Confucian Tianren Heyi,” *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 9 (2014): 579.

³⁷ Quoted in Yao, “An Eco-Ethical Interpretation of Confucian Tianren Heyi,” 576.

destruction of plants and objects. In this expanded framework, harming the environment is not only impractical but morally wrong, and care for the natural world becomes a virtuous expression of human flourishing. This holistic Confucian worldview affirms that “all people are siblings, and all things are companions.” Moral awareness, therefore, includes responsibility toward the broader community of beings. It encourages a relational understanding of humanity’s place within nature and promotes an ethic of ecological care rooted in compassion and solidarity.³⁸

The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer whose thought was greatly influenced by Buddhism, remarked, “Compassion for animals is intimately associated with goodness of character, and it may be confidently asserted that he who is cruel to animals cannot be a good man.”³⁹ The ethical outlook of religious traditions demonstrate that they can enable human awareness of the moral responsibility that human beings must have toward non-human creation. By extending our kindness and compassion to the environment, we can foster sustainable practices and protect the natural world from senseless harm.

At the heart of this discussion lies a profound awareness of suffering—our own and that of others. Compassion arises when this awareness is transformed into solidarity, rooted not in pity or condescension but in ethical responsibility and shared vulnerability. As religious traditions show, exhibiting these virtues toward nature reflects a form of spiritual humanism—one in which our hearts remain open and responsive to the experiences of all beings. Of course, intellectual awareness of suffering alone does not ensure ethical action. For some, suffering leads to bitterness or emotional withdrawal. Solidarity, then, is not automatic—it must be cultivated. Through spiritual discipline and moral reflection, we nurture the inner capacity to act with goodwill and empathy. The more we train ourselves in compassion and express it through concrete, outward actions, the more we strengthen our relationship of solidarity with all members of the community of creation.

Moderation and Contentment

Moderation and contentment are also essential virtues that buttress inter-creationality. They serve as the antidote for many social and environmental ills being experienced today. They oppose negative tendencies such as greed, excessiveness, and selfishness which are detrimental to personal spiritual progress as well as social and ecological flourishing. Thai scholar monk Prayudh Payutto remarked, “At the very heart of Buddhism is the wisdom of

³⁸ Yao, “An Eco-Ethical Interpretation of Confucian Tianren Heyi,” 581.

³⁹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Basis of Morality* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1903).

moderation.”⁴⁰ The Pali term for moderation, *mattāññutā*, combines *mattā* (measure) and *ññutā* (knowledge). According to Payutto, a person who practices moderation knows the right measure in consumption, speech, work, rest, and recreation. Their actions are guided not by personal gratification but by wisdom with the aim for balance and genuine benefit.⁴¹ Moderation is said to be deeply rooted in the Buddha’s life. Despite living a life surrounded by luxury and shielded from suffering, upon encountering illness, aging, and death, he renounced his privileged life in search of meaning. Initially embracing extreme asceticism, he later recognized its futility and discovered the Middle Way—a path between indulgence and self-denial that led to enlightenment and *nibbāna*.

As an antidote to greed, a major obstacle to liberation, moderation is frequently emphasized in Buddhist scriptures. The *Dhammapada*, for instance, advises avoiding harmful speech and behavior, being moderate in diet, and focusing on higher states of mind (Dp. 185). The *Aggañña Sutta* illustrates the consequences of excess. In this mythic account, luminous beings degenerate into coarse, embodied humans after greedily consuming a sweet earthly substance. Their radiance fades, and moral and environmental decline ensues, linking lack of moderation to both personal and ecological degradation (DN 27). While Buddhism does not demand poverty, it does warn against material attachment. The Buddha taught that true happiness lies not in sense pleasures but in simplicity guided by wisdom and virtue. Thus, monastics are to possess only essentials—a robe, a bowl, daily food, shelter, and medicine (MN I.10)—while avoiding luxuries like gold, silver, and ornate items.⁴²

Moderation is closely connected with contentment, a virtue that the *Dhammapada* describes as representing the highest wealth (DP 204) and that “leads to great goods” (AN VIII.22). The Buddha frequently encouraged his monastic followers to cultivate satisfaction with the basic necessities of life and to refrain from developing attachment to material possessions. In the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, he stated that contentment fosters wholesome qualities and reduces unwholesome ones (AN I.29). He praised monks who were content with whatever robes, food, or shelter they received. Such monks did not obsess over possessions, saw their limitations, and used them mindfully without

⁴⁰ Prayudh Payutto, *Buddhist Economics: A Middle Way for the Marketplace*, http://pioneer.netserv.chula.ac.th/~sprapant/Buddhism/buddhist_econ.html#Wealth%20and%20Spiritual%20Development.

⁴¹ Prayudh Payutto, *A Constitution for Living: Buddhist Principles for a Fruitful and Harmonious Life* (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1998), 15.

⁴² Cf. Barend Jan Terwiel, *Monks and Magic: Revisiting a Classic Study of Religious Ceremonies in Thailand*, 2nd ed. (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012); Sahni, *Environmental Ethics in Buddhism*, 128.

arrogance or judgment toward others (AN VIII.21). It must be stressed that Buddhism does not idealize poverty or condemn wealth. In fact, extreme poverty can hinder spiritual practice,⁴³ as a Vietnamese proverb claims: “You need food to uphold the faith.” While basic needs must be met, a life obsessed with material gain is discouraged. As the Buddha warned, wealth can lead to intoxication, negligence, and greed (SN III.6). This mirrors Jesus’ teaching: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 12:34).

Contentment stands in opposition to *tanhā* (craving)—the relentless desire for personal gratification, often at the expense of others and the environment.⁴⁴ Christmas Humphreys described craving as the force that isolates individuals, causing suffering through selfishness and separation. Craving leads to dissatisfaction because fulfillment is sought in impermanent things.⁴⁵ The Stoic Seneca echoed this idea when he observed that people were not poor for having little, but for wanting more. Buddhism teaches that true peace comes from ending craving and cultivating contentment.⁴⁶ Thus, contentment is a quality that leads to a vision of truth that truly satisfies.⁴⁷ In the face of greed which seeks satisfaction but never finds it, the real antidote is contentment and moderation.

Like the Buddha, Jesus also emphasized the values of moderation and contentment in everyday life. In his teachings, Jesus warned against accumulating earthly treasures, which are vulnerable to decay and theft, and instead urged his followers to seek lasting spiritual treasures in heaven (Matt. 6:19–21). Similarly, Luke 12:15 cautions against greed, reminding us that true fulfillment cannot be found in material possessions. These teachings encourage the pursuit of inner peace and discourage the endless seeking of wealth. In Matthew 6:25–34, Jesus expanded on this theme as he urged his followers to place their trust in God’s providence for life’s basic needs. He warned that excessive worry about food, drink, and clothing undermines spiritual well-being. Instead, what is more important is the sincere search for God’s kingdom and righteousness with confidence that in doing so, one’s essential needs would be met.

⁴³ David Loy, *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory* (Boston: Wisdom, 2003), 74.

⁴⁴ G. P. Malalasekera, “The Status of the Individual in Theravāda Buddhism,” *Philosophy East and West* 14, no. 2 (1964): 152.

⁴⁵ Christmas Humphreys, *Buddhism* (Harmondsworth, England: Pelican Books, 1951), 91.

⁴⁶ Prayudh Payutto, *Buddhist Economics: A Middle Way for the Marketplace*, http://pioneer.netserv.chula.ac.th/~sprapant/Buddhism/buddhist_econ.html#Wealth%20and%20Spiritual%20Development.

⁴⁷ Sangharakshita (trans.), *Dhammapada: The Way of Truth*, (UK: Windhorse Publications, 2000), online version.

This message of moderation and contentment is echoed in the writings of the Apostle Paul. Addressing early Christian communities, Paul told his listeners that true gain comes from a combination of godliness and contentment. He urged believers to be satisfied with what they have and to recognize the fleeting nature of material possessions (1 Tim. 6:6–8). In his letter to the Philippians, Paul attributed his strength to his relationship with Christ while expressing his own sense of contentment in all circumstances (Phil. 4:11–13).

Together, these biblical teachings encourage trust in God’s providence rather than dependence on material wealth. The Catholic Church continues this message in its social teachings, which often critique consumerism and call all people—both believers and those of goodwill—to foster a culture of moderation. This involves shifting focus away from material excess and toward spiritual growth.⁴⁸ Lasting contentment is not found in acquiring every color of a new shirt, another pair of shoes, an additional car, or a second home for vacation. It lies in the awareness that, through a deep relationship with Christ, we already have what we truly need.

Islamic teachings place considerable emphasis on the principles of moderation and contentment as essential components of a virtuous life. The concept of moderation, known in Arabic as *wasatiyya*, is a recurring theme in both the Qur’an and the Hadith. The Qur’an instructs believers to pursue a path marked by balance and fairness, exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad’s own life. For instance, Surah Al-Baqarah (2:143) highlights the importance of fostering a just and moderate community, modeling the Prophet’s example. Moreover, the Qur’an warns against indulgence and extremism. Surah Al-A’raf (7:31) cautions against excesses in worldly matters with the advice for believers to enjoy the provisions granted by God. Moderation is further reinforced in the Hadith, where the Prophet consistently advocated for a life of balance. He is reported to have said that “the best actions are those done in moderation,” which points to the importance of temperance in both worship and daily conduct.

Alongside moderation, contentment (*qanā‘a*) is a deeply valued quality in Islam. The Qur’an repeatedly calls on believers to place less importance on worldly possessions while cultivating gratitude and satisfaction with what they have. Surah Al-Baqarah (2:152) encourages a continuous remembrance of God and the expression of thankfulness for divine blessings. Gratitude, in this context, serves as the foundation of contentment and helps individuals recognize sufficiency in their current circumstances.

⁴⁸ Ryszard F. Sadowski, “The Role of Catholicism in Shaping a Culture of Sustainable Consumption,” *Religions* 12 (2021): 598.

Islamic perspectives on contentment go beyond material satisfaction, encompassing a spiritual tranquility that stems from trusting in God's will. Surah Al-Hadid (57:23) reminds believers that those who accept both fortune and hardship as part of God's decree will ultimately be rewarded. Thus, both moderation and contentment are seen not merely as ethical ideals, but as spiritual disciplines that align one's life with divine guidance.

The virtues of moderation and contentment, taught by various religious traditions, are undeniably crucial in fostering balance within the community of creation. By curbing unnecessary loss of life and alleviating the strain on natural goods, these virtues contribute significantly to ecological well-being. Setting limits on our lifestyles and prioritizing genuine needs over wants can reduce the impact of consumerism and commodity production on natural resources. As scholar of Buddhism Donald Swearer noted, "One chooses less so that all may flourish more."⁴⁹

In addition to alleviating the strain on natural goods, embracing moderation and contentment carries a profound significance in our lives by instilling a deep appreciation for the things we already possess. In a world that ceaselessly promotes the allure of upgrading to the latest technologies and trends, it becomes all too easy to overlook the value in what we already have. It is no coincidence that in the Psalms of the Hebrew Bible, gratitude is so often highlighted as an essential attitude toward God's blessings. Likewise, in the New Testament, Christians are extolled to "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thes. 5:18).

In Islam, gratitude (*shukr*) is considered a fundamental part of Islamic spirituality. Muslims are encouraged to express gratitude daily to God for God's blessings, and to show appreciation to others who have helped them. The Qur'an teaches that those who are grateful to God will receive even more blessings, while those who are ungrateful will face divine punishment. Confucius also took gratitude as a central tenet of his teachings, making it one of the aspects that undergird the practice of filial piety, which calls on individuals to show reverence and respect to their ancestors, parents, and elders. In the deeply Confucian influenced Vietnamese culture, a proverb reminds people when they eat fruits not to forget those who have planted the tree. Another proverb admonishes one to remember the source when taking a sip of water.

Religious teachings often remind us that true happiness lies not in material wealth but in simplicity, gratitude, and spiritual growth. Genuine well-being comes from inner peace rather than constant accumulation. This mindset not only benefits individuals but also supports ecological flourishing. Studies

⁴⁹ Donald Swearer, "Buddhist Virtue, Voluntary Poverty, and Extensive Benevolence," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 26, no 1 (1998): 93.

show that gratitude fosters pro-environmental attitudes while encouraging responsibility for future generations and stronger support for climate action and sustainable practices.⁵⁰ Gratitude towards other members within the community of creation leads to greater respect and care for creation. This disposition motivates concrete actions like reducing waste, conserving energy, and using natural goods responsibly. As the Buddha wisely taught, one should not harm the tree under whose shade one rests, for doing so would betray a friend and act unjustly (Pv. 9:3–5).

Reciprocity and Mutuality

At the heart of the paradigm of inter-creationality is the principle of reciprocity, a common ethical norm across world religions popularly referred to as the Golden Rule. While often associated with interpersonal relationships, reciprocity can also extend to human interactions with non-human creation. In Confucianism, reciprocity is expressed in both negative and positive forms. The familiar negative version—“Do not impose on others what you do not desire” (Analects 12.2, 15.24)—guides respectful conduct. However, texts like the *Great Learning* and *Doctrine of the Mean* present reciprocity positively, especially in governance and moral cultivation. Rooted in *ren* (humaneness), reciprocity emerges from innate compassion, expanded through moral development. Neo-Confucianists, influenced by Buddhism, later elevated the Golden Rule as a central ethical ideal, applying it beyond family to society at large.⁵¹

In Christianity, the Golden Rule is found in Jesus’ declaration in the Gospel of Matthew 7:12: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” This rule represents a rearticulation of the injunction to love God and love neighbor stated in the Torah of the Hebrew bible. While these principles were already in the Jewish scriptures, Jesus’ contribution was to make these two actions inextricable. One cannot be fulfilled without the other. Jesus’ ethic of love is rooted in recognizing the transformative power of God’s love which calls us to see every person in the context of God’s presence, irrespective of their social, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds. He exhorted his listeners to perceive others as reflections of God’s presence, not as threats or mere allies. Thus, the act of loving

⁵⁰ Stylianos Syropoulos, Hanne M. Watkins, Azim F. Shariff, Sara D. Hodges, and Ezra M. Markowitz, “The Role of Gratitude in Motivating Intergenerational Environmental Stewardship,” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 72 (2020): 101517.

⁵¹ Mark A. Csikszentmihalyi, “The Golden Rule in Confucianism,” in *The Golden Rule the Ethics of Reciprocity in World Religions*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton (London: Continuum, 2008), 165–168.

one's neighbor, who embodies divine presence, is inseparable from loving God. It is a moral responsibility as well as an expression of faith.⁵²

Other traditions—Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Greco-Roman thought, and more—also affirm reciprocity in various ways. As Marcus G. Singer observed, the Golden Rule's presence across traditions supports its status as a universal ethical principle. It promotes empathy, compassion, and fairness: treating others as one wishes to be treated.⁵³ Integral to reciprocity lies the ability to understand the perspective of others. This understanding curbs judgment based on preconceived notions and unrealistic expectations by encouraging us to put ourselves in another's place. Such empathetic awareness guides appropriate action. Reciprocity, therefore, is not about rigidly applying rules, but about discerning the right response by considering others' feelings within specific contexts. This process of understanding requires imagination—an essential tool in truly stepping into another's shoes.

Reciprocity nurtures mutuality—a dynamic relationship where both parties share common interests, values, and benefits. Beyond material exchanges, mutuality fosters trust, emotional support, and cooperation. It rejects a simplistic and transactional tit-for-tat model of engagement and embraces generosity of spirit. For example, when volunteering for a charity, one offers not just time but also expertise, receiving in return a sense of fulfillment, even personal and spiritual transformation. Mutuality thus strengthens interpersonal bonds characterized by a shared sense of purpose and harmony. A relationship grounded in reciprocity and mutuality lays the foundation for healthy, meaningful connections and contributes to a more harmonious world.

Traditionally, reciprocity has been understood within the context of human relationships. Some may argue that extending it to non-human creation is a conceptual leap. Yet, this essay's exploration of religious worldviews suggests otherwise. Embracing inter-creational reciprocity calls for broadening the I-Thou relationship to include the natural world. When reciprocity begins with a desire to eliminate mutual suffering, it naturally extends beyond humanity. As the Buddha taught, "All tremble at violence; life is dear to all. Putting oneself in the place of others, one should not kill nor cause another to kill." This teaching affirms that empathy and reciprocity are not limited to human interactions but are foundational to all life-affirming relationships.⁵⁴

⁵² Bruce Chilton, "Jesus, the Golden Rule, and Its Application," in *The Golden Rule: The Ethics of Reciprocity in World Religions*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton (London: Continuum, 2008), 79.

⁵³ Marcus G. Singer, "Golden Rule," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 365–67.

⁵⁴ Acharya Buddhārakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1985), sec. 130.

Envisioning Traditional Wisdom within a New Paradigm

Understanding and applying religious traditions to contemporary issues is challenging, especially given their diverse and historically situated teachings. While religions have always addressed real-life concerns, today's global environmental crisis presents an unprecedented challenge. Therefore, applying traditional teachings to this new context is not always straightforward. To navigate this, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim proposed a three-part methodological approach: retrieval, reevaluation, and reconstruction. Retrieval involves exploring scriptural texts and commentaries to uncover insights on human–earth relationships. Reevaluation assesses the relevance of these teachings in today's context, identifying how they might address ecological concerns. Reconstruction seeks to adapt or reinterpret these traditions to respond meaningfully to current environmental challenges, often leading to new expressions of faith and ethics. This process requires sensitivity to differing interpretations and careful representation of traditions. Scholars and practitioners can work together through creative dialogue to carry out this interpretive journey.⁵⁵

Applying this method to the principles of ethical living as discussed in this essay allows these values to extend beyond human relationships and into the relationship between humans and the rest of the community of creation. The virtues of reciprocity, mutuality, gentleness, compassion, etc. involve not just avoiding harm, but actively working for one another's well-being. For example, humans can act responsibly by using natural resources with restraint and care. This includes reducing energy use, conserving water, managing waste, and promoting renewable resources. As beings with intellect and moral agency, humans can also design social and economic systems that prioritize long-term sustainability and well-being—for both human and non-human creation. This involves evaluating the ecological impact of our choices, adopting sustainable technologies, and building economies grounded in justice and equity. In the digital age, digital sustainability is also crucial. This means using technology responsibly to reduce its environmental footprint—through energy efficiency, sustainable production, reducing e-waste, and raising awareness. By optimizing how we produce and use digital tools, we support a healthier planet.

While non-human creation cannot reciprocate in the same ways humans do, it contributes to our well-being in its own essential ways. Physically,

⁵⁵ Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, "The Movement of Religion and Ecology: Emerging Field and a Dynamic Force," in *Routledge Handbook in Religion and Ecology*, ed. Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim (New York: Routledge, 2017), 7-8.

creation provides us with air, water, food, and medicine. Everything we consume, whether plant- or animal-based, originates from the natural world. For centuries, humans have relied on nature's pharmacy—plants and herbs with healing properties—to treat illness and support health. The non-human world also supports our emotional and mental health. Time in natural settings reduces stress, enhances mood, boosts focus, and fosters creativity. It offers a space for reflection, mindfulness, and mental restoration. These psychological benefits are increasingly supported by research and affirm the importance of maintaining a healthy relationship with the environment.

On a spiritual level, creation nurtures our inner lives. Natural environments inspire awe, reverence, and humility, drawing us into deeper contemplation and connection with something greater than ourselves. Many religious traditions, such as Buddhism, view the non-human world as a significant teacher. Observing the processes within creation helps us confront the illusion of a permanent self and the futility of clinging to wealth, power, or material status.

When viewed through the lens of inter-creationality, the relationship between humans and non-human creation becomes one of mutual self-offering. Each part of creation possesses both *intrinsic value* (inherent worth) and *instrumental value* (usefulness to others). Environmental ethics often warn against reducing nature to mere utility, but true ecological responsibility lies not in choosing one type of value over the other. Rather, it involves recognizing that both intrinsic and instrumental values coexist—in humans and in all members of the community of creation.

By affirming the inherent goodness and mutual benefit of all creation, we cultivate a relationship grounded in reciprocity and mutual care. This perspective invites both human and non-human members of the community of creation to engage in mutual service—each giving according to their nature, each benefiting the other. In this perspective, intrinsic and instrumental goods are not opposing binaries but complementary aspects of a relationship where mutual service naturally arises from the affirmation of mutual goodness.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the paradigm of inter-creationality embodies a transformative vision that seeks to overcome egocentric, ethnocentric, and anthropocentric orientations within the human community, calling instead for an expanded ethical consciousness that embraces all members of the community of creation. The religious traditions explored in this essay provide rich spiritual and

philosophical resources that support this paradigm—both in its foundational cosmo-logical insights and its ethical applications. Religious transformation, grounded in these traditions, fosters the cultivation of moral virtues essential for initiating and sustaining inter-creationality, thereby nurturing a robust ecological ethos.

This essay has highlighted key virtues—such as gentleness, compassion, moderation, contentment, gratitude, and reciprocity—that serve as pillars for inter-creational relationships. Yet, this list is by no means exhaustive; virtues such as humility, prudence, responsibility, and respect also play a crucial role in shaping an ethical orientation attuned to the flourishing of the whole. While the term ‘inter-creationality’ may resonate more readily within Abrahamic theological frameworks, the underlying relational dynamics it describes—of mutual dependence, intrinsic value, and moral responsibility—are present across diverse religious traditions.

The central insight underscored here is that human beings are not external to, but integral members of, the broader community of creation. Accordingly, virtues traditionally applied within human society must now be extended beyond intra-human relationships to encompass the entirety of creation. Only through this expansive moral imagination can inter-creationality serve as a viable and compelling paradigm for ecological harmony and mutual flourishing in a wounded world.

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