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Synodality: Walking Together as a Church in Communion, Participation, and Mission

MISSIONARY ANIMATION CENTRE

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A guru is similar to a candle, in that it consumes itself in order to illuminate the path for others

Foreword

Journeying Together

The process of Synod on "Synodality" that Pope Francis launched in October 2021, is taking place at a time when the Church struggles to recover from the brokenness of sex abuse scandals and clericalism, poverty, isolation and loss of job opportunities caused by the global pandemic, wars, problems of the influx of migrants and refugees, human trafficking, religious intolerance, and social injustice.

With the Synod's listening sessions in parishes and dioceses across the globe, Pope Francis has invited the Church into what is fundamentally a process of healing, from wounds suffered inside the Church, and those experienced in areas of our relationships. It is a call to embrace the vulnerability on a synodal journey. Pope Francis time and again tells us that this synod is about listening to each other, listening to the prompting of the Holy Spirit who speaks through many voices of all the members of the Church. This is about the "processes" and not the "product." Usually we are worried about the end product of our activity; here the subject is about the process, of being as a community in which everyone is given space to share her or his ideas, a communion in which no one is sidelined.

The Synod's purpose has been described as aiming to inspire people to dream about the Church, we are called to be, like the early Christian community, where all who believed were united heart and soul, for the fulfilment of the mission. Pope Francis' call for the Synod is a call of the Holy Spirit, who has taken root in each of us, giving us a unique purpose and enabling us to partake in

God's reconciling and restoring work in the world.

In today's world when we are tempted to be individualistic and choose our own paths, and not the path of the Lord, Synodality is a clarion call for renewal. It is a time to check our individual and collective conscience, on how we carry out our mission and how we listen to the Holy Spirit, speaking to us through persons and events in our mission and ministries. It is said, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." Synodality invites us to journey together and to learn a new way of being Church, which spurs us to recover prophecy, having the Gospel as the sole rule of life. It challenges us to serve humanity, to abandon all abuse - be it of power, conscience or sexual - to get freed from all forms of slavery and to promote synodal relations. It is a time for us to go forward by making ourselves small with the people, to promote the dynamics of collaboration and co-responsibility, to articulate the participation of all.

Ultimately, this path of walking together is the most effective way of manifesting and putting into practice the nature of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God. In parishes, small Christian Communities, lay movements, religious communities, and other forms of communion, men and women, young people, and the elderly, we are all invited to listen to one another, in order to hear the promptings of the Holy Spirit, who comes to guide our human efforts, breathing life and vitality into the Church and congregation, leading us into deeper communion for our mission in the world. In this sense, Synodality enables the entire MSMHC to walk forward together, listening to the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, to participate in the mission of the Church in the communion that Christ establishes among us.

Sr. Philomena Mathew
Superior General

Message

Called to Communion, Participation and Mission

Pope Francis invites the entire Church to reflect on a theme, "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission" that is decisive for its life and mission. Synodality itself stands out as a method, it is not an end in itself, the Church is the end. Synodality is a method of governing the Church, a method of fulfilling its mission, and a method of involving the Christian faithful in the life of the Church. That is the reason why the term synodality is not in isolation; it goes together with the three adjectives - communion, participation and mission.

Communion: Communion means unity, and togetherness. By His Love God gathers us together as the first people of one faith which finds its deepest root in the love and unity of the Trinity. By listening to the word of God and through the living tradition of the Church together we all have a role to play and discerning and living out God's call for his people. Communion is a very important word for the Catholic Church because Catholic Church is a Church that works in communion, and evangelizes in communion. So, it is not that every Church exists in isolation, but we work in unity and in this communion, we now talk about participation.

Participation: This is very important point that while we are maintaining our unity we also see about participation. Participation is a call for the involvement of all who belong to the people of God: Laity, Consecrated and Ordained to engage in the exercise of deep and respectful listening to one another. This listening create space for us to hear the Holy Spirit together and guides our aspirations

for the Church. In a single Church in the whole community in a free and rich diversity of its members called together to pray, listen and analyze, dialogue, discern and offer advice and making pastoral decision which corresponds as closely as possible to God's will.

How does everyone participate in the life of the Church? We have to answer this question beginning from the grass root. We reflect upon it in our Christian community in our mission station, in our parishes, in the level of the diocese, etc. We look at the participation in the Church at all levels, and also, we look at the degree of participation in the *trimunere* of the Church, i.e., the three official offices of teaching, of governing, and of sanctifying. These are the three offices of the Church which belong to the diocesan bishop, but we are looking at these three offices and see how the entire Church can participate in the *trimunere* of governing of teaching and of sanctifying. Bishops are the successors of the Apostles. They have the role to guard the teaching of the Church. But the sense of faith is not always only with the priests, but it is also with the people. The whole body of the baptized people cannot make an error in matters of faith. From the bishop to the last of the faithful. The sense of faith is injected by the Holy Spirit in each of the baptized people.

How are we going to proclaim our faith? People of God together have to proclaim their faith as a community. Today the Church is considered as 'all the baptized people.' Lay people should take responsibility to preach the Word of God. The Church has to go back to the early Church because the lay people also have the responsibility to evangelize. The first Christian community followed exactly a synodal way, the entire community together, not just the Apostles; and they were listening to what the Spirit was saying through each of them. (cf. Acts). When there were problems or conflicts, they exchanged ideas, by listening to one another as at the first Assembly in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 15 and Gal 2:1-10), and

many times throughout the history of the Church, in order to move forward together. Scriptures are giving us the norms; the way we should follow.

Who is guiding the Church today? Some may say the Pope, the Bishops, the Priests. But it is not they, it is the Holy Spirit who is guiding the Church. The Church is not just the hierarchy. Pope Francis says, 'We want a listening Church.' Listen to whom? Listen to one another. Bishops need to listen to the lay people, lay people need to listen to the bishop, priests need to listen to the people, priests need to listen to the bishop, everybody in the Church needs to listen to one another. Should we listen only to the people who come to the Church? Pope Francis said, "We need to listen to people who never come to the Church also. Hence, we need to go to the periphery." What we expect from this synodality is a 'Conversion' - A Conversion for Mission.

Mission: The third aspect is mission. The Church exists for Mission. The Church exists to evangelize. We can never be centered on ourselves. Our mission is to witness to the love of God in the midst of the whole human family. The Church from the very first day of its foundation is missionary. Jesus said to his Apostles in Mt 28: 19 "Go therefore, make disciples of all nations." And so, from the moment of the mandate given by Christ to the Church, the Church is missionary, the Church is always going out to make disciples of all nations, the Church will never stop being a missionary Church. The synodal process has a deeper missionary dimension to it. It is intended to enable the Church to better witness to the Gospel, especially, with those who live on the spiritual, social and economic, political, geographical and existential periphery of our world. In this way the synodality is a path by which the Church can more fruitfully fulfill her mission of evangelization in the world as a leaven at the service of the coming of God's kingdom. And so, these are the three aspects that synodality is being treated. Synodality as a method of being and belonging to the Church, and

at the same time, we look at it on the communion, participation and mission. This is what synodality is all about. Learning from one another. Your voice is important.

It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium. This journey, which follows in the wake of the Church's "renewal" proposed by the Second Vatican Council, is both a gift and a task: by journeying together and reflecting together on the journey that has been made, the Church will be able to learn through Her experience which processes can help Her to live communion, to achieve participation, and to open Herself to mission. Our "journeying together" is, in fact, what most effectively enacts and manifests the nature of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God. (Synod 2023 Preparatory Document). Let us read the present signs of the time with the help of the Holy Spirit. Let us listen to him and then put into action what the Holy Spirit promises so that our Church will be a vibrant Church of Jesus Christ.

Sr. Bridget Diengdoh MSMHC
General Councillor for Evangelization

Editorial

Consecrated Women On The Road of Synodality

Caring for life is the horizon that inspires, encourages, and guides our consecration. Life is a gift, full of possibilities, but also tenanted by fragility and vulnerability; therefore, it is necessary to take care of it diligently. Care arises when someone's existence matters. It is, then, that we dedicate ourselves to the other, to all that the person go through. This is compassion. Now, compassion implies a way of connecting or relating; it consists fundamentally in perceiving the suffering of others as one's own, that is, in the ability to internalize the suffering of another human being and living it as if it were one's own experience. Compassion supposes a commitment to solidarity.

Compassion leads us to embrace vulnerability, our own and that of others. It leads us to open our eyes and to perceive the situation of suffering in which other human beings are living. Showing compassion for someone does not mean replacing or deciding for them. It implies putting yourself in her shoes, without stealing her identity, without invading her territory. Trust is essential in any exercise of care. Trust someone means believing in her, placing oneself in her hands, putting oneself at her disposal.

Reflecting on the logic of care, the most important thing will be to take care of the community living. The Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano wrote a story that it beautifully expresses what is enlivened when we talk about synodality. In his story he writes, a man from the town of Negua, on the coast of Colombia, was able to ascend to the heights of heaven. And when he returned, he recounted.

He said that, from up there, he looked down and contemplated human life. And he said that we are a sea of little fires. "That is the world" he revealed. A lot of people, a sea of little fires. *Each person shines with their own light among all the others. There are not two equal fires. There are big fires, and small fires, and fires of all colors. There are people with serene fire, who do not even notice the wind, and people with crazy fire, who fill the air with sparks. Some fires, silly fires, do not illuminate or burn; but others burn life so eagerly that you cannot look at them without blinking, and whoever approaches them, is set on fire.*

Frequently in recent times we hear the word synodality and perhaps, we perceive it as something new. In effect, it is not something unheard of in the history of the Church. Pope Francis in his discourse for the 50th anniversary of the institution of the bishops' Synod explains that from Vatican Council II to today, the Church experiences in an increasingly intense way, the need and the beauty of walking together. He himself proposed from the start of his ministry as the Bishop of Rome, to value the Synod, considering it one of the most precious heritages of the Council Assembly. He recalls his predecessors who, at different times, promoted this style: St. Paul VI who, with prophetic intuition, institutes the Bishops' Synod with the intention of repeating the image of the Ecumenical Council and reflecting its spirit and method. He re-echoes St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI who reaffirm that the journey of synodality increasingly responds to what God expects of the Church in the third millennium.

The key to walking together in synodality is to join little fires, until something new burns and what is most genuine is cared for and strengthened. Synodality means exercising ourselves in the pedagogy of care. The certainty that accompanies us is that every relationship is based on love and enriched by the bond of love; it is

there that joy increases and valid channels are opened for communication, exchange, and collective construction. José Cristo Rey García Paredes, in his rereading of *Vita Consecrata*, expresses that: *Consecrated Life does not aim to isolate itself from other forms of Christian life: it is called to interrelate with them and form part of the "ecclesial we" of the body of Christ that is the Church. So that, in this way, the good of one member contributes to the wealth and well-being of the entire body. Everyone in the Church participates in a common dignity, everyone is called to live in holiness and to cooperate in the edification of the body of Christ; but the Spirit grants different gifts. Thus, the Church is an organic communion of various vocations, charisms, and ministries.*

It is evident that, today, Consecrated Life shows that it is more fragile, smaller, more wounded and limited. Therefore, it is more apt to set its heart on what is fundamental and so, with humble daring, it can recreate in the Spirit of God, capable of making all things new. Pope Francis, consecrated by vocation and conviction, knows well that our moment is fruitful and that, in this long night, only the centrality in Jesus Christ will restore to Religious Life its mystical, prophetic, and missionary identity. Fruitfulness comes to the Church, when she is ready to meet, when she welcomes difference and enables the development of gifts and charisms in diversity and complementarity. We achieve vitality when we transcend the idolatry of individualism and dispose ourselves to the art of the common, enabling listening that converts, the word that energizes, the commitment that opens new paths.

The uniqueness of human existence, and of our religious consecration is community living. In the charism, which has been granted to each of us, there is a tendency to relate with others, in complementarity and co-responsibility; and that requires openness to diversity, the ability to unite rhythms, to combine languages,

cultures, sensibilities and visions. It supposes a new contemplative look that enables us to discover the good, the truth, and the beauty alive in every human being. In a world of separation and individualism, communion is the greatest witness that we can give to our people around us. The ideal of brotherhood and sisterhood must be, for us, a horizon of meaning; and that requires an unlimited dose of tenderness and kindness. Only the daily exercise of tenderness and kindness will make us more human and reflect more clearly the face of God among us.

Nothing that closes us in on ourselves and protects us is evangelical. What characterizes the Christian is the path, openness, the gift of the other. We are called to unity: *May they all be one, as You, Father, are in me, and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you sent me.*

Unity is an attribute that configures identity, that preserves the essence, that ensures harmony, that favors passing the test of time. Where there is unity there is harmony, communion in values and principles. Unity does not exclude difference, and it has an unchallengeable harmony that comes from the encounter, the communication, and the bond. It requires relationship. It is built, and in it, there is room for vulnerability, fragility, and limits; it supposes the permanent exercise of reconciliation and forgiveness and requires disarming and learning. It is not possible when there is pride, stiff spirals of power, and even less where there is no flexibility and openness to the Spirit.

Conclusion

Women religious all over the world contribute to the Church's mission through their diverse vocations of service. They journey closely with the People of God and have a deep knowledge of their dreams, joys and sorrows. Women religious enrich the Church through their witness and work as theologians, teachers, spiritual

guides and professionals in many careers. Yet their service and contribution to the mission of the Church are neither always acknowledged nor appreciated. Pope Francis has invited consecrated women to discern best how they can respond to their challenges and those facing humanity. This Synod offers an opportunity for the Church to listen to the experiences, hopes and dreams of consecrated women. The Church is called to set it in motion as a sign of the times. We are entering into its novelty and content. Synodality is the path and vocation of the church which has the community participation. As consecrated women, we are on the synodal journey and let us strengthen it with our valuable contributions.

The synodal process calls for an enhanced role of the laity and particularly of the place of women in the Church. There is so much more to be done. On this score, well-known feminist and theologian Dr Astrid Lobo Gajiwala says, "the world is gearing up for the Synod on synodality, called by Pope Francis. It is common knowledge that Women fill the pews, hold up the parishes, and minister to the lost, lonely, unwanted and forgotten, especially in places where the Church would never reach if it were not for the women. Synodality presumes a discipleship of equals which is sorely lacking in the androcentric, patriarchal, hierarchical church. True synodality can only happen when the People of God live the synodality in daily events of life.

Sr. Viji John MSMHC

…if you are trying to show off for people at the top, forget it.

They will look down on you anyhow.

And if you're trying to show off for people at the bottom, forget it. They will only envy you. Status will get you nowhere.

Only an open heart will allow you to float equally between everyone.

(Mitch Albom)

Bishop Stephen Ferrando's Missionary Life: A Lived Synodality

Sr. Rosita Joseph MSMHC

Introduction

"Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Bishop Stephen Ferrando, the Founder of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians walked together with a people who were in search of their own identity, liberty and dignity" says Cardinal Joseph Siri about Bishop Ferrando. His project of missionary life was a journey together with people who were waking from the slumber of colonial experience. He was able to stand beside the poor and downtrodden. His life became a prophetic sign for the people of the region. He laboured for the good of all, for the formation of human person, the Christian families and communities. He possessed a magnanimous heart replete with intuitive qualities. With equilibrium, he lived in fidelity to apostolic times and witnessed to the beatitudes of the Gospel. *Ad lucem per caritatem* was the synonym of his active evangelising mission that gave substance to his service for the local Church. His missionary life had so much of thinking and acting 'synodally' which gave pastoral orientation to his life as the bishop of the vast diocese of Assam Mission. The heart of his missionary activity then was communion and participation and the same is in the present scenario of the Church which has a Synodal heart.

1. Journeying with Diversity of Christian Communities

Bishop Ferrando possessed a synodal mind, caring for people who lived in peripheries. As a witness to God's mercy, he journeyed

with hardships among the poorest and voiceless, the oppressed and refugees driven from their home land. (cf. Jer 37:21; 38:1). His closeness with various cultures made him a lovable missionary, that helped him understand and appreciate the deeper values of the people, their manner of living and their legitimate desires. Therefore, the option for weaker sections of the society lead us to fellowship with the poor.[1] Ferrando had the missionary universalism of St. Paul (cf. 2 Cor 11:22). He maintained good relationship with people and his visits to villages were directed to all categories of people and rooted in their real life. His journey along with people, made them partakers of the Church's mission. He included them in the local and regional level in different associations of men, women and youth. Hence, the faithful and their pastors planned common initiatives with the brothers and sisters of other denominations and religions.[2]

Being a pastor rooted in culture, he listened to the voice of God and identified the needs of the people and heard what the Spirit says to the Churches (cf. Rev 2:7). He was an authentic pastor and guardian, interpreter and witness of the faith to the Church and people. With *Sentire cum Ecclesiae* and listening to the voice of God, Bishop Ferrando listened to his people until he was in harmony with God's plan for which God called him to act as pastor and teacher of all Christians in Northeast India. He did not act as higher or lower, his journeying together with people led them towards an encounter with Christ the Lord. For him it was necessary that every missionary should serve his brothers and sisters in the villages of the mission so that as faith grows mature and literacy and livelihood becomes adequate, they would become agents of fraternity among people of their neighbourhood. He lived his life in a continuous act of loving God through his people; so

1 Cf. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 234.

2 Cf. ASPF No. 3699, Ferrando to Propaganda Fide, 1953, 26-30.

much so whatever he received by way of funds, his foremost concern was the poor, the needy and the sick.[3]

Seeing things from the standpoint of communion, Pope Francis says: " An attitude of service requires, and indeed demands, a good and generous heart, in order to recognise and experience with joy the manifold richness present in the people of God."[4] Northeast India has remarkably copious cultural and ethnic diversity. As a missionary of the region, Bishop Ferrando, appreciated the rich ethnic heritage of people. One must acknowledge the diversity as a gift of the Holy Spirit. He journeyed together with people, shared the travails of history, rediscovered the inviolable richness and dignity of peoples, by exercising his authority as service to peoples, through a style of co-responsibility, bringing about a more beautiful and human world for coming generations.[5] What is significant about Bishop Ferrando was, in his own ways he created space for everyone, recognised their dignity and made them feel they have an active role to play in the mission of the Church. Authority becomes service when it shares, involves and helps people to grow.

What brought effectiveness in his apostolic work is Christ centeredness. Many of us work together, but what builds communion is also the ability to listen to God's Word together in prayer. Bishop Ferrando had the limitations of his own temperament too. However, he encouraged the missionaries to work, made them feel that they have active roles to play in the mission of the Church. He told the Missionary Sisters that they have an active role to play in the

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3 Cf. D. D. Lyngdoh, "Testimony", 11.2.2004, Shillong, in *Copia Publica*, Vol. 1, p. 214; C. Wahlang, "Testimony",11.2.2004, Shillong, in *Copia Publica*, Vol. 1, 236.

4 Francis, "Holy Father's greetings to the Roman Curia," 31.12.2021, *L'Osservatoire Romano*, no 53, 11.

5 Cf. *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 36.

Church by their missionary vocation, hence, their primary duty is to be teachers of faith among the people. He said that the Sisters must be very glad to go to villages, where there are so many needy children, so many needy people and ignorant people who are waiting to know about God.[6]

2. Encouraging co-responsibility in the mission

A Church which is committed to the cause of Christ will definitely work for the promotion of justice, human rights and will find its own path of being 'salt and light.' The clergy, religious and the faithful serve joyfully and courageously by a life of sacrifice in the different ministries of the Church. Only a heart that is open to mission can ensure that everything we do, *ad intra* and *ad extra* is marked by the regenerating power of the Lord's call. In his mission report of 1938 on the theme 'fervour of Christian life', Bishop Ferrando says: "The true sign of fervour of Christian life is sharing and participation in Church's mission and increase in the number of her children through sacraments. He called this fervour as "spiritual thermometer."[7] Another sign of the fervour of Christian life according to Ferrando was the creation of confraternities to share the mission of the Church: such as training of catechists and formation of Catholic action groups. They are indeed the authentic model of the sublime work of propagation of faith and evangelisation in the Church. "He called them the leaven of Christian life, light that illumines and salt which preserves the faith of the people."[8]

The encyclical letter, *Fratelli Tutti* sketches the contours of collective consciousness, collective action and common good.[9] Ferrando's Missionary approach had the full tint of pastoral

6 S. Ferrando, *From the Heart of a Father Who Loves You,* 177.
7 Cf. ASPF No.5192, Ferrando to Propaganda Fide, 28.12.1938, 210.
8 Cf. ASPF No.5192, Ferrando to Propaganda Fide, 28.12.1938, 210
9 *Fratelli Tutti,* no. 7

approach, a missionary going forth to be missionary disciple. He moved forward, took initiatives, went out to others and made strangers into friends of the Church, and welcomed outcasts to the true fold of Christ. In the *Salesian Bulletin* Bishop Ferrando wrote that the Catholic Church is going through a new passage of time, the foundation of the reign of Christ among the people. The day of the Eucharistic procession witnessed the active participation of sodalities of the young, the association of adults, the music, hymns and the preparation of the solemn altar for the final blessing of the Eucharistic Lord are tangible signs of true fraternity and the triumph of God among the people.[10] Through the promotion of literacy programmes and establishment of educational and vocational institutions, he encouraged and educated the young to work towards a harmonious family and society. This gave awareness to them to participate in the mission of the Church. Following the Salesian tradition, the festive and daily oratories were used as a powerful means of educating the young, instruction in the faith, inculcating discipline and moral values, making them active participants in the Church's mission.[11]

3. Ability to scrutinize the signs of the times

Pope Francis says: No one is saved alone; we can only be saved together.[12] It was clearly lived by the world and all of us when the Pandemic Covid 19 swept the whole world and took away many lives. In the early days of the Church in Northeast India, when Wars (1939-1945) flood (1950) and cholera (1950) broke out, our zealous missionaries of Northeast India, with rare courage ventured among the victims and gave medicines and relief services to them. The pioneer MSMHCs assisted by the Daughters of Mary Help

10 Cf. S. Ferrando, "Risorge la cattedrale di Shillong", 17.11.1937, in *Bollettino Salesiano,* Vol. 16, No. 2, .38-39.

11 Cf. A8910229, Ferrando to P. Ricaldone, 20.11.1937.

12 *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 32.

of Christians nursed the wounded victims of the World War II, gave them medicines needed and taught them hygiene. This courageous and charitable service which was the need of the hour, made a deep impression on all.[13]

During the years of World War II, the Salesians dedicated their attention and resources to help the refugees from Pakistan and Burma, displaced people due to calamities and war, the war victims and soldiers who flocked to Assam.[14] The ecclesiastical authorities were very supportive of the rehabilitation work of the refugee girls taken up by Bishop Ferrando, in order to improve their living conditions spiritually and materially.[15] The governor General of India visited the refugee camps in Garo hills in 1965 and he acknowledged the praise-worthy work of the missionaries, especially the women religious rendering humanitarian services.[16] Through the work of evangelization, the missionaries worked for the progress of the Christians materially, morally and intellectually, with the aim of human promotion, giving awareness to proper sense of economy and responsible leadership.[17] In every mission centre, there were developmental works and cooperative banking to lend money and rice to poor farmers.[18]

The founding of the Congregation of the MSMHC and the establishment of St. Paul's seminary in Shillong was another far sighted missionary vision of Bishop Ferrando which can definitely be called a Spirit filled event in the history of the Catholic Church

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13 O. Paviotti, *The Works of his Hands*, 107.

14 Cf. ASC A8910316, Ferrando to P. Ricaldone, 17.10.1945; ASC A8910324, Ferrando to R. Ziggiotti, 24.11.1954.

15 Cf. ASV No. 909, Cardinal Pignedoli to Ferrando, 25.3.1968.

16 Cf. S. FERRANDO, "Governo dell'India Ministero della riabilitazione", in *Bollettino Salesiano* 84 (1965) no. 12, 382.

17 Cf. ASPF No. 5192, Ferrando to Propaganda Fide, 28.12.1938, pp. 210-211.

18 Cf. ASPF No. 5192, Ferrando to Propaganda Fide, 28.12.1938, 210.

in Northeast India. Bishop Ferrando, the protagonist took the initiative, sowing seeds of vocation in the hearts of the young, recognised the ability and leadership qualities of the young, especially of women who could be great missionaries and educators of faith. Enzo Bianco wrote thus: Bishop Ferrando realized that there is much to do for the evangelisation of the people. So gave vent to his missionary vision in the founding of the Congregation, which would work in collaboration with the missionaries in those difficult times.[19]

The division of the diocese of Shillong was a blessing, in the far-flung Shillong diocese. One needs to study the development of great number of mission stations and Christian villages, the vastness of the Northeast, the villages and peoples waiting to be evangelised etc., The growth of the Church and division of parishes and the great number of schools and boarding houses called for planting the Church locally, which helped to increase the number of local vocations. Bishop Ferrando urgently needed more missionaries, and in 1948 at his invitation, the Missionaries of Christ Jesus came from Spain. Their presence in Northeast India led to the formation of Christian communities.[20]

His special concern for the training of catechists stands as a testimony of his zeal for God, to make the Church grow in faith. He educated the young to be evangelisers of families and villages. He built orphanages, oratories for the young, hospital, vocational training centres; agricultural and technical institutions with the aim of integral human development. His great interest in fostering of local vocations is considered as a remarkable vision he had for the growth and development of the Church. The vastness of the mission and scarcity of missionary personnel demanded

19 Cf. E. Bianco, *Mons. Stefano Ferrando*, 23.

20 Cf. S. Ferrando, "Assam - Diocesi di Shillong: Movimento di conversioni", in *Bollettino Salesiano* 61 (1937) no. 9, 203.

deploying lay collaborators in the mission. One of the means for approaching new mission frontiers and sustaining the existing centers was to train catechists adequately, and increasing their numbers.[21]

Bishop Ferrando was quite convinced that the seminary for the local clergy was a great need, as the entire future of the mission depended on them. As a missionary who toured the length and breadth of the diocese, he had seen the necessity for the constant pastoral presences of missionaries in the villages. On the one hand the formation houses in *loco,* was an urgent need but on the other hand, the equanimity had to be maintained so that the mission centers would not suffer want of personnel.[22] He manifested an apostolic zeal in fostering vocations and instilled the same in his missionaries so that the youth in the schools, boarding houses and institutions were attracted to become good citizens, and were inspired to priesthood and religious life.

4. Ability to work together to build a common home

Discerning the path towards progress and working together to build a harmonious Church was the priority of Bishop Ferrando right from the beginning of his missionary life. Working and walking together serves a purpose, that is obviously solidarity. Keeping in focus the three features of Synodality: communion, participation and mission, the Church can be renewed, new frontiers can be identified and reached out. He was a people- oriented bishop, who went before the people of God, stood in their midst and made every effort that everyone will be saved and no one strays from the true fold of Christ. His life in northeast India was an encounter with Christ among various cultures. With an attitude of trust, he made many efforts to inculturate the faith among various tribes

21 ASPF No. 3699, Ferrando to Propaganda Fide, 25.9.1953, 29.
22 Cf. ASC B7090433, Ferrando to R. Ziggiotti, 15.11.1951.

and cultures, thus creating a familial atmosphere to work in harmony with God and neighbour.

His mission of Assam comprised of diverse backgrounds and traditions "were pilgrims on the way to unity", who came closer to the goal of living in unity with the same faith. Fixing his gaze on Jesus, the centre of all his efforts, Bishop Ferrando worked assiduously to promote unity and integrity in the Church without any formalism and complacency and he was careful not to fall into these risks. Like Jesus who compassionately walked with the disciples on the way to Emmaus and listened empathetically to their stories by spending quality time with them, the missionaries of Northeast India, enlightened the hearts and enkindled the minds of the people through the proclamation of the Gospel. Like the disciples, the Christians were ready to return to Jerusalem to share their experience with others (cf. Lk 24:33). In his apostolic letter *Mane nobiscum Domine*, St. John Paul II says that the two disciples urged Jesus to sit with them and the disciples entered into profound communion with him, in the 'sacrament of the Eucharist' (cf. Jn 15: 4).[23]

By entering into communion with Jesus they realised their duty as 'missionaries' thus they are called to discover new frontiers in their mission to proclaim Jesus. In order to build a common home one has to have the attitude of collegiality in the *modus viventi et operandi*. The notion of exercise of ministry as bishop in the service of the Church and share his profound experience of God was the main emphasis of Bishop Ferrando's life and ministry. With a single minded devotion to the Church, incarnating Gospel into various cultures with creative fidelity to traditions, and walking together in communion with the people of God, sharing reciprocally the gift of faith, bishop Ferrando lived his missionary life.

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[23] Cf. John Paul II, *Mane nobiscum Domine,* no. 19.

He was adept in the teachings of the Church, kept up the distinctive characteristics of Vatican II: unity, holiness, Catholicity and apostolicity in his missionary life. He journeyed through the hardship of history like a prophet, invited people to a conversion of their hearts to God and exercised justice in his relationship with people. Often the poorest, the oppressed and the outcast found a special place in his heart. As a priest, he excelled others for his benevolent charity, compassion towards the poor and ignorant indigenous people and their false and ignorant beliefs.[24] He spent himself completely for God and others in an attitude of the servant of God.

5. A Spirit filled journey

The Holy spirit guided the path of Bishop Ferrando to discern the needs of the Church as a shepherd and pastor. The entire article summarises the pastoral-theological vision of Bishop Ferrando in his journey with the flock to lead them to God. The Spirit guided him to communicate the Gospel in a historical and geographical environment, in an attempt to build solidarity and fraternity among displaced persons and refugees. He made every effort to restore them to a dignified life, especially the women, girls and children, by developmental works, such as schools in the villages and health care centres in rural areas. A Spirit filled journey involves solidarity with the poor and the marginalised. This was the same road Christ travelled during his public ministry. Pope Francis says: Journeying towards the poor is inspired by the Spirit of God, it is a social attitude born of personal conversion, therefore it finds expression of charity towards the needy.[25] It also testifies to the fact that, the Holy Spirit encouraged Bishop Ferrando to make distinctive contribution in the Church through his service to humanity through various works of charity.

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24 Cf. ASPF No. 2777, P. Ricaldone to Propaganda Fide, "*Vitae Curriculum*: Stefano Ferrando," 13-18.

25 Cf. *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 115.

He employed all his energy for the cause of evangelisation, human and intellectual formation, and physical and spiritual health of the people of God. The Spirit inspired him in an effective way. He directed his life first and foremost to a life of prayer in order to lead people to God. He placed his trust in God, relying not on his own strength, but on the grace of the Holy Spirit. He adopted as his own the exclamation of St. Augustine: "You have made us for yourself, Lord, our hearts are restless until they rest in you." His work as a missionary bishop was the continuation of the work of Jesus. In the midst of daily activities or missionary tours, Bishop Ferrando remained in his life of intimacy with God. *Ora et labora* (prayer and work) that was his daily life, that brought a harmony of grace of unity in his life.

6. Acquiring and living the virtues

St. Paul says: Put on then, compassion, kindness, lowliness, gentleness and patience (cf. Col 3:12). This attitude of St. Paul gives us a notion of an inseparable connection between our life with God and our life with others. According to Bishop Ferrando: The one who cultivates virtues will abide in charity, forgive one another and help one another. Such a person will go about performing one's duties with serenity.[26] Journeying together in Synodality implies, living a virtuous life, listening to the spirit, discerning God's plan for the community, promoting new ventures, encountering new frontiers and appreciating differences in an attitude of sharing one faith. Acquiring the virtues takes place in the midst of our everyday life with others. It is here in the midst of the daily realities, God places before us multiple opportunities to change our attitude towards persons. We then become more involved in our unique role as Christians, educate ourselves in the Spirit and work together for good (cf. Rom 8:28).

[26] Cf. S. Ferrando. *From the Heart of Father Who Loves You*, 29.

Conclusion

The synodal process inaugurated by Pope Francis with the theme: Towards a synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission, hoped for is walking together recognising the Lord in the working of the Spirit. The pioneer missionaries of Northeast India envisaged a Church, that supported and helped as a single family, as children of the same earth, which is our common home. They risked their life, put up with all inconveniences and dreamt of a Church mature in faith. In one of his letters to the Holy See, Bishop Ferrando said, "The Salesians with their special charism and pedagogy of educating the young brought about many developments in the Church. One could notice a new optimism and fresh energy among the Christians in their participation of the Church and they manifested outstanding zeal in working for the progress and promotion of the faith."[27] After a long mission tour to the villages, he wrote to Fr. Peter Ricaldone, that the Church was growing steadily and the harvest was always great as the missionaries were on continuous tours to the villages.[28] He and his missionaries were *God experienced* persons, they proclaimed to people what they had heard, and what they had seen with their own eyes and touched with their hands – 'the Word who is life'.

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27 ASPF No. 3083, Ferrando to Propaganda Fide 2.9.1935, 526-532.

28 Cf. S. Ferrando to P. Ricaldone, 21.12.1940, in *Copia Publica*, Vol. 4, 1242-1243.

The Praxis of Synodality and Women Religious Journeying Together as a Non-negotiable Lifestyle for Mission

Sr. Lisy George MSMHC

Introduction

The word Synodality has been reverberating in and around us, in our reflections, discussions and conversations, ever since Pope Francis inaugurated the diocesan phase of the synod on October 10, 2021. He invited everyone in the universal Church to be part of the synodal journey on the theme "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission".[1] Ever since it has gained momentum, as heeding to the call of Pope Francis the synodal process has been initiated in the dioceses across the globe. In this context, it is most fitting that we enter into a process of discernment on what Synodal process entails for us as a missionary religious congregation. The following reflection is an attempt to recognise the lived expressions of synodal dimensions among us indicating how we can make it more intense and visible in all its richness, while also daring to walk together new and challenging paths as we embark on a serious synodal process among us as religious women on mission.

Synodality indicates journeying together and listening to one another but above all to the Holy Spirit. To deepen this essential characteristic

[1] DICASTERO PER LA COMUNICAZIONE, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Opening of the Synod*, 9 October 2021, Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

of the Church it involves all the faithful at local Churches across the world, promising to listen to all, especially to laypeople. That is why this Synod is a two-year long process, clearly marked in phases, as a diocesan phase of six months followed by a continental phase of six months. The final "universal Church phase" will culminate in the traditional assembly of the Synod of Bishops in the Vatican in October 2023.

Church in a Synodal Style

Frequently in recent times we have heard the word synodality and, perhaps, we have perceived it as something new. In effect, it is not something unheard of in the history of the Church. Pope Francis in his discourse for the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Bishops' Synod, explains that from Vatican Council II to today, the Church experiences in an increasingly intense way, the need and the beauty of 'walking together'. Pope John XXIII saw that the church had an urgent mission to bring the world "into contact with the vivifying and perennial energies of the gospel." Pope Francis himself proposed from the start of his ministry as the Bishop of Rome, to value the Synod, considering it one of the most precious heritages of the Council Assembly. He recalls his predecessors who, at different times, promoted this style: Pope Paul VI who, with prophetic intuition, institutes the Bishops' Synod with the intention of repeating the image of the Ecumenical Council and reflecting its spirit and method. He is echoed by St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI who reaffirm that the journey of synodality increasingly responds to what God expects of the Church in the third millennium.[2]

[2] FRANCIS, Discourse for the Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Bishops' Synod, 17 October 2015, *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*.

Pope Francis on Synodality

As the Universal Church was about to embark on the synodal journey, on the eve of the solemn inauguration of the Synod on 9 October 2021, Pope Francis led a moment of reflection and invoked the Holy Spirit on the People of God so that they will be able to move forward together, to listen to one another and discern our times in solidarity with the struggles and aspirations of all humanity. Let us recapitulate the core of the synodal process that would be very relevant for our synodal journey, drawing greatly from his short reflection that captures the soul of the synodal process in simple yet profound words.

The Protagonist of the Synod - The Holy Spirit

The Pope wished that the Synod be a true season of the Spirit, the ever-new breath of God who sets us free from every form of self-absorption and guides us where God wants us to be, not to where our own ideas and personal tastes would lead us. "In the one People of God, therefore, let us journey together, in order to experience a Church that receives and lives this gift of unity, and is open to the voice of the Spirit."[3] Pope Francis said, stressing that the Synod is an "ecclesial moment", whose protagonist is the Holy Spirit. "Without the Spirit, there is no Synod,"[4] and he earnestly prayed;

Come, Holy Spirit! You inspire new tongues and place words of life on our lips: keep us from becoming a "museum Church", beautiful but mute, with much past and little future. Come among us, so that in this synodal experience we will not lose our enthusiasm, dilute the power of prophecy, or descend into useless and unproductive discussions. Come, Spirit of love, open our hearts to

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3 *Ibid*

4 ROBIN GOMES, Pope on Synod:The participation of everyone guided by the Holy Spirit, 10 October , 2021, *Dicasterium pro Communicatione, Vatican News.*

hear your voice! Come, Holy Spirit of holiness, renew the holy and faithful People of God! Come, Creator Spirit, renew the face of the earth! Amen.[5]

Communion, Participation, Mission

Explaining the Synod's three key words - communion, participation and mission - Pope Francis said that communion and mission describe the mystery of the Church. Communion expresses the very nature of the Church, according to Vatican II. Saint John Paul II stressed that *koinonia* gives rise to the Church's mission of serving as a sign of the human family's intimate union with God.[6]

He pointed out that communion and mission can risk remaining somewhat abstract, unless Synodality is concretely expressed at every step of the synodal journey and activity, encouraging real involvement on the part of each and all. All the baptized are called to take part in the Church's life and mission. "Enabling everyone to participate is an essential ecclesial duty!" he stressed, adding, it is an indispensable ecclesial commitment based on the "identity card" of the baptism.[7]

He seems to be weaning us off of our overdependence on structures, organizations and institutions. If so, then his three main words for the synod -*communion*, *participation*, *mission*- make perfect sense. If we are to bring those gospel energies to the world in need, then we must be together, in communion, and be clear about our identity in Jesus Christ. Our participation or involvement with both the gospel and the world enables us to be

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5 DICASTERO PER LA COMUNICAZIONE, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Opening of the Synod*, 9 October 2021, Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

6 *ibid*

7 Cf.*Ibid*

present where we need to be present. Finally, this movement frees us to embrace our purpose or mission more readily.

Three Risks to Avoid

Pope Francis had a word of caution that a Synod can run the risk of being a mere formal external event, instead of being a process of authentic spiritual discernment that we undertake, not to project a good image of ourselves, but to cooperate more effectively with the work of God in history". For this, "we need content, means, and structures that can facilitate dialogue and interaction within the People of God, especially between priests and laity".[8]

There is at times a type of elitism among the clergy that distances them from the laity, which makes them the "lord of the house" and not a shepherd. This, the Pope said, requires changing certain overly vertical, distorted, and partial visions of the Church, the priestly ministry, the role of the laity, ecclesial responsibilities and roles of governance.

Another risk that a Synod can run into is becoming intellectual, offering learned but abstract approaches to the problems of the Church and the evils in our world, which are far removed from the reality of the holy People of God and the concrete life of communities around the world.

A third danger that a Synod should avoid is the temptation to complacency, which says, we have always done it this way" and it is better not to change. The word 'complacency' "is a poison in the life of the Church".[9] People with such an attitude apply old solutions to new problems. The Holy Father stressed that the synodal process should involve the local Churches, in different phases and from the bottom up, in an exciting and engaging effort

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8 Cf. *Ibid*

9 Ibid

that can forge a style of communion and participation directed to mission.

Three Opportunities

The synodal process of encounter, listening, and reflection, help the People of God, the Church, to recognize at least three opportunities. First, it must move not occasionally but structurally towards a synodal Church, where all can feel at home and participate.

The Synod offers us the opportunity to become a listening Church, to break out of our routine in order to stop and listen, firstly to the Spirit in adoration and prayer, and then to our brothers and sisters, their hopes, the crises of faith around the world, the need for renewed pastoral life. It is a mutual listening in which each one has something to learn. Everyone in the church, clergy, religious and lay, has to listen to the others and one another in order to discern the will of the Spirit. It requires an act of faith which is based on the conviction that God is at work in world history. Pope Francis referred to the prophet Elijah who learned that the Lord was not in the wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire, but rather in a tiny whispering sound. "This is how God speaks to us," said Francis, and "we need to open our ears to hear that tiny whispering sound."[10]

Keeping in mind that God's style is one of closeness, compassion and tenderness, the Pope said the Synod is also an occasion for the People of God not to be aloof but to become a Church of closeness by her very presence, bandaging wounds and healing broken hearts with the balm of God.

10 Cf. Ibid

Not Another Church but a Different Church

For this, the Holy Father said, we need the ever new breath of God, the Spirit, who sets us free from every form of self-absorption, revives what is moribund, loosens shackles, and spreads joy. "There is no need to create another Church, but to create a different Church," the Pope said citing Dominican priest Father Yves Marie-Joseph Congar. "For a 'different Church'', the Pope urged all to invoke the Holy Spirit with greater fervour and frequency and humbly listen to Him journeying together as he, the source of communion and mission, desires: with docility and courage.[11]

To be a Religious Community with a Synodal Style Today

Perhaps the question arises in us: how can we recognize if our community is living the synodal dimension today and how can we make it more visible in all its richness? I think we can be illumined by placing ourselves in docile listening to the Holy Spirit to discover in His light the marvels that God has worked in the history of our congregation, in the style and spirit begun by Venerable Stephen Ferrando and in the life and mission of the first little group of pioneers until the departure of our Founder from the soil of our Foundation. In this way, we can find a realistic, concrete response that will help us to open our hearts to the marvellous action of God that had generated holiness of life in so many sisters and people we serve. Then a new apostolic passion will invade our being and will renew in each of us the joy of walking together. The freshness lived at the origins is re-proposed today as the attraction of the atmosphere of our first Communities, Formation Houses and Mission Centres, in simplicity of life and relationships, humility, in passionate love for Christ, ardent and compassionate love for the people, especially the poor women, girls and children and in great missionary daring. A deeper listening to our Foundational years as

11 Cf.Ibid

a community entrusted with a mission can truly be a synodal process for us.

Sisters Mary Surin, Veronica Kujur and Josephine Demta, the three pioneers of the Congregation, undertook their first missionary tour to Dibrugarh on 29 December 1946… The Brahmaputra valley with its forests, wild animals, torrential rain and swelling rivers made their missionary tours hazardous. Yet, undaunted, they continued their missionary tour for 43 days… Back at their convent at Guwahati, the Sisters found that they were even keener to return to villages to proclaim the Word of God than they had been originally… Mindful of the opportunities of preaching the Good News… the sisters proceeded with their second missionary journey on 11 March 1947. Seeing the immense good the sisters were doing in the villages of Dibrugarh, Fr.Boscardine requested Bishop Ferrando to let the sisters stay on there. It led to the establishment of St.Mary's Convent, Dibrugarh… In 1955 there were as many as 14 sisters there, solely engaged in touring extensively the villages around North Lakhimpur, Doomdooma, Naharkatia, Digboi, and even as far as Manipur and Nagaland.[12]

It is one of the many images of a community of the foundational years that clearly expresses the blossoming of the life that bears the imprint of an active, open, co-responsible togetherness for mission. This listening to our pioneering years does not only provoke in us 'nostalgia for the past', but stimulates us to express today, our being creative communities, sowers of prophetic hope. Are we now the effective salt, light and leaven that bring "the modern world into contact with the vivifying and perennial energies of the gospel?[13] In some measure perhaps we are, but certainly not to

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12 JANE MARY THADATHIL, A Great Missionary Legacy, Centre for Indigenous Peoples and Missionary Sisters Publications, Shillong, 1997, p.111.

13 *"Humanae Salutis" December 25, 1961, Vatican.va*

the full measure. And it is that gap that we need to address through the process of synodality. We are invited to rediscover with renewed charismatic passion, the originality of this style that certainly was not described with the term 'synodality' but which, for all intents and purposes, it was. Are we in truth ready to enter into open and receptive dialogue with the myriads of cultures we encounter within our congregation and in our missionary settings? Can we truly and courageously face our past and dialogue with our pioneer missionaries and recapture our history as a vibrant missionary presence with deep love and commitment to the poorest of the poor, especially women, children and girls? Can we have an intense and daring discernment on the expressions of our charism today so as to discern our way forward in our social milieu?

Family spirit is a great gift that we have inherited and listening becomes dialogue when person is at the centre and every sister can freely express her face, her richness and creativity. It is a challenging but surprising attitude, because it makes us open our hearts to God's dimensions that are always those of gratuitous love, mercy, forgiveness, and tenderness. To broaden our vision on reality with its complexity and challenges, also means the care of our 'common home' that is increasingly threatened by beginning to care in our context first of all for the space entrusted to us in and around our convents, to imbibe this great love from our tribal and farming communities and to listen to the untold stories of the people in our missionary setting.

Listening and Dialogue for Communal Discernment

The synodal life comes about where there is genuine communication of faith, life and missionary commitment. It gives expression to the communion of saints in prayer and nourished by the Sacraments. It flourishes in love of each other and of everyone, grows by sharing all the joys and trials.

Synodal dialogue depends on courage both in speaking and in listening. It is not about engaging in a debate where one speaker tries to get the better of the others or counters their positions with brusque arguments, but about expressing whatever seems to have been suggested by the Holy Spirit as useful for communal discernment, at the same time being open to accepting whatever has been suggested by the same Spirit in other people's positions, "for the general good" (*1 Corinthians* 12,7).[14] It is very pertinent for us as religious women to understand the need to express ourselves and share our views. It is equally important for those among us who are more confident and are in administrative or animating roles in the community or congregation, to patiently encourage those with feeble voices and those not so confident to express their opinion. An unassuming and humble sister engaged in ministering to the community or to the people in the villages may have the grace and anointing of the Spirit to assist in the process of discernment for apostolic effectiveness in the light of her experiences of touching the lives of the poor and being part of the struggles of the people. The wisdom gained through humble service and lived experiences in a rural mission station in a far flung village or among the poorest of the poor in the slums marked by genuine love, touching their external and internal world from their perspective is a thousand times better than all the intellectual knowledge gained on the subject.

The criterion according to which "unity prevails over conflict" is of particular value in conducting a dialogue, managing different opinions and experiences and learning "a style of constructing history, a vital field where conflicts, tensions and opposites can reach a pluriform unity which generates new life", making it

[14] INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, 2 March 2018, No.111, vatican.va.

possible to "build communion amid disagreement"[15] Yes, indeed! Building communion amid disagreement is possible. It is only when we as communities in mission are able to enter into sincere and open dialogue with one another, all our collaborators in mission and the people we are sent to, we truly begin to arrive at a better understanding of the reality before us. Actually, dialogue offers the opportunity to acquire new perspectives and points of view in order to shed light on the solution of the matter in question.[16] It is a matter of adopting "a relational way of viewing the world, which then becomes a form of shared knowledge, vision through the eyes of another and a shared vision of all that exists.[17] This is an area we as women religious needs to pay great attention. A relational way of viewing the world will help us to walk the path with deep humility and respect when we move from one community to another, taking on new responsibilities. Deeply understanding the scope of the mission of the community, the path so far traversed by the members, in dialogue and communion we move ahead aware of our responsibility in holding up the missionary commitment in the chalice of our lives in fidelity to the Lord and our predecessors. We bring in our creativity and talents into the setting yet resisting the temptation to pull down or ignore the process undertaken and path traversed by our predecessors thus far. This would ensure peace, continuity, apostolic dynamism and bring visibility to the foundational charism of the Congregation in and through our communities.

An essential attitude in synodal dialogue is humility, which inclines each one to be obedient to God's will and obedient to each other in Christ. Humility helps us see the other as important and also enables

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15 FRANCIS, *Evangeli Gaudium* 228, Vatican.va

16 INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, 2 March 2018, No.111, Vatican.va.

17 FRANCIS, *Lumen Fidei, 29 June 2015, 27,* Vatican.va

us to put the common good and interest first. True humility will listen to the other with respect and will always enter into a dialogue, respecting the opinion and experience of the other and resisting the temptation to value the opinion subjectively only in relation to how the person comes across to me . It is here that we need to be non-judgemental and enter into dialogue perceiving the presence and inspiration of the Holy Spirit in all. According to St.Paul, two temptations which undermine the life of the community are the spirit of jealousy and that of vanity.[18] So much of time and energy can be saved, peace of mind enjoyed and a great missionary effectiveness as a result of synergy and unity can be experienced if these two temptations are rooted out from our lives.

Communal discernment implies carefully and courageously listening to "the groans" of the Spirit[19] which emerge through the explicit or sometimes silent cry that goes up from the People of God: "to listen to God, so that with Him we may hear the cry of His People; to listen to His People until we are in harmony with the will to which God calls us.[20] A disciple of Christ must be like a preacher, who "has to contemplate the Word, but he also has to contemplate his people".[21] Discernment must be carried out in a space of prayer, meditation, reflection and study, which we need to hear the voice of the Spirit; by means of sincere, serene and objective dialogue with our brothers and sisters; by paying attention to the real experiences and challenges of every community and every situation; in the exchange of gifts and in the convergence of all energies in view of building up the Body of Christ and proclaiming the Gospel; in the melting-pot of feelings and thoughts that enable

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18 INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, 2 March 2018, No.112, Vatican.va.

19 *cf. Romans* 8,26

20 FRANCIS, Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, AAS 107, 2015, 1114

21 *Cf.* FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 154, Vatican.va

us to understand the Lord's will; by searching to be set free by the Gospel from any obstacle that might weaken our openness to the Spirit.[22]

Synodality and Leadership Style

We often hear it said 'Church is not a democracy'. This can very well be applied as well to our context as a congregation. If that means the congregation as sisterhood, communion and family, then we can understand the statement. On the other hand, if it is meant as a defence for authoritarian and monarchic practises among us then it becomes suspicious and problematic.[23] Having lived through a democracy all our life, we know that often democracy can become dangerously 'majoritarianism' where the minorities and their voices are drowned. This could be one of the glaring reasons why neither church nor religious congregations can be a democracy. On the other hand, when even the feeblest voices have space among us and are heard and acknowledged, then Synodality begins to become praxis in the style of our leadership. One single person, who has been insignificant most of her life or a small group, could sometimes be much closer to the truth than most of us. That is how God speaks to us. We need to open our ears to hear that tiny whispering sound, the gentle breeze of God, which scholars also translate as "a quiet whisper" or "a small, still voice". God was not in the storm but in the still small voice (cf. 1 Kg 19:11-13).

Synodality as Closeness, Compassion and Tender Love

Synodality offers us the opportunity to become a community of closeness. Let us keep going back to God's own "style", which is closeness, compassion and tender love. God has always operated

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22 INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, 2 March 2018, No.114, vatican.va.

23 Felix Wilfred, *'Synodality in the Footsteps of an Argumentative Jesus'* in Salesian Bulletin, Salesian Publishing Society, Kilpauk, February 2022, 10.

that way. If we do not become this community of closeness with attitudes of compassion and tender love, we will not be members of the Lord's Church. Not only with words, but by a presence that can weave greater bonds of friendship with the society and the world. A congregation that does not stand aloof from life, but immerses herself in today's problems and needs, bandaging wounds and healing broken hearts with the balm of God. Let us not forget God's style, which must help us: closeness, compassion and tender love.[24]

Some Moments of Synodal Discernment in the Congregation

Discernment is a constitutive element for the life and mission of every religious Congregation. Our Founder was a person of discernment who as we have seen in the North East Mission was well-versed in the art of stimulating involvement and co-responsibility. An attitude of discernment enables one to listen wisely and to read reality with faith in the daily experience of God. This requires that we engage in a life of prayer, profound listening to God in the Word; that we reread the events of our daily lives in light of the Word and our charism in order to perceive the Lord's steps, his invitations to continual conversion and interior freedom[25].

Let us look at concrete examples of the way in which the Congregation lives discernment and our responsibility consciously make such moments more and more an on-going synodal process.

- **The personal meeting with the superior**, known among us as 'friendly talk' is considered a privileged moment for

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[24] DICASTERO PER LA COMUNICAZIONE, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Opening of the Synod*, 9 October 2021, Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

[25] YVONNE REUNGOAT, Salesian Spirituality, Paper presented at the General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops, 2021.

strengthening communion, discovering God's will and deepening the spirit of the congregation in practical life. It is an irreplaceable element in the Salesian Spirituality for personal and communal growth in the identity of the MSMHC.

• **The community Meetings.** These are significant moments in which the communities plan, implement and evaluate community projects together with a sense of accountability.[26] These experiences of discernment, programming and evaluation are considered key moments of participation at all levels because they enable correlation, reflection and the detection of the most appropriate ways to live and work together, faithful to the charism within a plurality of circumstances. Along with this today more than ever we are invited to have regular meetings with our lay collaborators so that they are offered a gradual preparation and may become co-responsible for programming and goals according to the spirit of the congregation in all areas of our apostolate.

The Council at the local and provincial levels is a privileged space for participation, discernment and co-responsibility. It becomes a school of formation because it fosters maturing in interpersonal relationships, in shared mission and in the ability to govern. It enables us to listen to both reality and the Spirit and to seek appropriate choices together.

• **Circular letters from the Superior General.** These letters constitute an appointment, of both official and formative character. Through circular letters, the Superior General reaches out to the communities, conveying orientations and reflections that touch mainly on operations, are attentive to the spirit, charism and mission of the Institute, and in profound harmony with the Church's journey and that of consecrated life today. Circulars thus become a

[26] MISSIONARY SISTERS OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS, The Constitutions and Regulations, 2013, 130, no.57.

privileged space for meeting, confrontation and openness to the signs of the times. They are a significant means of communion and accompaniment in the Congregation.

The General Council. The organizational model of the General Council reflects this strategy of discernment as it aligns to coordination for the sake of communion; it involves the sharing of reflections, careful discernment, collaboration with sisters who participate in various areas of animation and government, meetings (both informal and/or scheduled), and core team meetings of the General Council with their collaborators. The sharing and implementation of common commitments strengthens collaborative bonds, arouses new energies and nourishes convergence.

The General Chapter is an important experience of discernment of God's will for the congregation, lived in a meaningful synodal process. Its implementation is a powerful time of validation, reflection and orientation for a communal search for God's will. Each sister is called to be involved in this process by making her own contribution. The sisters, who are called to represent all the Provinces and Delegation, humbly listen to the Spirit and study realities related to the different sociocultural contexts in order to make decisions together that will increase the vitality of the Institute, in fidelity to the spirit of its origins and in response to the challenges of the various contexts. This methodology of involvement and preparation is also experienced at the General Chapter as a synodal process which begins in the concrete experience of the communities as they reflect on the theme of the Chapter in docility to the Spirit and with attention to the various situations. In this way, the Chapter reflection is not constructed at a desk, but reflects the life of the Congregation with its hopes, difficulties and differences. The decisions that are then made by the Chapter are proposed to the communities in their lived reality so that these decisions might be shared, chosen, and lived. In an intercultural

Congregation such as ours, the chapter dynamic must include plenty of time to listening at various levels so that all might express themselves and so that there might be sufficient mutual understanding. Thus, from diversity, communion might be maintained and cultivated.

In the style of Synodality, it is necessary to welcome and value differences and different points of view. They should not be denied or concealed, but received. The important thing is not to lose sight of the perspective that is grounded in communion. In order to arrive at convergence and to be persons of communion and reconciliation, despite different points of view, the sisters are called to make progress in the ways of dialogue, clarity, mutual hospitality, in a constant process of conversion of heart and mind according to the Gospel. The "spirit of family" and "passion for the mission" opens the heart to God and overcome partial views in order to arrive at a confluence. In this sense "it is possible to resolve and transform conflict into a link in a new process."[27] Disagreement and conflict, if well managed, can become an opportunity for growth for everyone. It can be an occasion to verify whether we are on the groove of the charism or closed in on ourselves and trapped within our "thoughts" and "views". Disagreement and conflict can help us to make the paschal transition from the individualistic "I" to the communitarian/ecclesial "we".

In order to live this logic, it is crucial that we always tend toward the goal: we are a community for the mission. This requires awareness that every community is an apostolic community in which concerns and hopes, prayer, the goals of pastoral action and material goods are shared in view of the Congregation's mission. This requires a willingness to participate, co-responsibility and mutual communication, in serene and loyal encounter and in a harmonious integration of personal values.

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27 FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 226.

Few Insights from Our Tradition and Practice towards the Synodal Process

Key insights from spiritual tradition and practice seen that are helpful for developing Synodality and the synodal process

- Attentive listening to God, to people in humility and to our ever-changing reality
- Coordination for communion as a style of animation proper to those who believe that in each person there are resources to be valued and developed to serve the common mission
- A family spirit that creates a climate of trust and openness, of reciprocity and co-responsibility
- Welcoming and valuing differences
- Listening with faith and humility to people and our collaborators
- Sincere and open dialogue, discernment in the Holy Spirit, prayer and planning to foster a journey "together" and the construction of an inclusive "we" in view of the mission.
- Awareness that as a congregation we are "God's people on a journey together." We are responsible for having received a charism for the good and vitality of the Church. Therefore, we live communion in the Congregation as the People of God; not in a self-referential community closed in on itself, but open to the mission of the Church and in the Church.

Conclusion

Let us conclude by underlining the twofold objective of Synodality: on the one hand, along the missionary line traced by *Evangelii Gaudium*, "the objective of these participatory processes will not be primarily ecclesial organization, but rather the missionary dream of reaching everyone."[28] On the other hand, along the lines of the

[28] FRANCIS, *Evengelii Gaudium*, 31.

social responsibility launched in the encyclicals *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*, Synodality aspires to form a people, a fraternal and missionary community at the service of the common good of society, especially the poor and displaced and the care of the common home, the earth. Therefore, we see for us, the synodal process serves our objective of being missionaries who are called to go to the ends of the earth to proclaim the Good News as witnesses to the Lord through our lives of communion, participation, mercy, compassion and tenderness.

The ecclesiology of the local Church and synodality

Sr. Viji John MSMHC

Introduction

The church is a place where everyone feels welcomed, loved, forgiven, and encouraged to live a good life of the Gospel. The documents of the Second Vatican Councils are impregnated with the universalistic ecclesiology. The documents explore that the Church is a communion of individuals and it becomes ever more so through the Eucharist, which is communion by its very nature. However, in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* we can also sense the starting of a theology of the local Church[1] which has its foundation in the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity, and its sacramental nature finds its fullest expression in the celebration of the Eucharist. For example, Cardinal Ratzinger emphasizes, an ecclesio-logy of communion is at the heart of the doctrine of the Church presented at the Vatican Council II as a new element and at the same time rooted in the beginnings of Christianity.[2] The idea of communion or community was present in the first millennium Christianity when the local churches lived as one family.

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1 Cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 11; *Lumen Gentium*, 23; *Ad Gentes*, 19–22; *Christus Dominus*, 11.

2 Cf. J. Ratzinger, "Eklezjologia Soboru Watykañskiego II," 16–19; cf. A. Cattaneo, *La Chiesa locale*, 11.

Pope Francis explicates, a synodal church is one and it is aware that it has to assume a diversity of voices. In a musical concert, we all know that each instrument has its own voice to contribute and the coherence of different voices makes the concert melodious and joyful. Therefore, the coherence of the ideas and opinions of diverse members of the People of God is the strength and the beauty of a synodal Church. Pope Francis' call to synodality has motivated the church these days to attract, to involve, and to participate in the activities of the church. He fosters synodality as a major concern of his pontificate, a new style of being church in the world of materialism and individualism. In so much so, various initiatives and publications promote the implementation of a synodal church all over the world. Based on this strategy, Pope has chosen "For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission" as the theme for the next Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. He said that synodality is not a parliament, an inquiry, or an opinion poll, but it is a call to communion in the life of the Church and to be united as the People of God. It is a process of spiritual discernment. The starting point is baptism which he called our "identity card". Baptism invites and authorises all of us to participate in the life of the Church and its mission. It gives us the indication that all the baptized are called to be promotors and actors of synodality. The Spanish theologian Cristina Inoges Sanz said that for many lay members of the church, "this is the first time that they are aware that their voice is important."

Communion of the Community

Synodality empowers all the People of God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that they can discern in common how to meet the missionary challenges of today's world. It is a Christian way of life and a practice marked by listening and discerning. It is a spirituality which requires attitudes of faith and trust, faith in God and in others. It requires attitudes of mutual listening and humility, of dialogue and of freedom to seek the truth. It is a matter of

developing a true culture of encounter in the service of common good, in welcoming and respecting differences with the conviction that God dwells in each person that we can only discern the calls of the Spirit together in the mutual listening. It is the wish of God that every member in the Church must be protagonists and discern together the voice of the holy spirit.

To put it in a nutshell synodality is making a shift from the "I" to the "we" and rediscovering the primacy of the ecclesial "we" of the community, an open, inclusive community that enables men and women to walk together with Christ at the center. This article aims at describing a synodal Church which is relational, inclusive, dialogic, discerning, generative and pluricultural. A synodal church is also a missionary church, a church of participation and co-responsibility, trying to live deliberation and decision-making beyond traditional sacramental roles, since its life is not predetermined but lived and experienced in every ecclesial space open to the world.

The Development of the Concept of Synodality

Synodality is often used according to the etymology of the word synod, which derives from the Greek word *sun-dos* which means 'walking together'. It is walking together in listening to the Holy Spirit. It indicates also the path along with the People of God walk together. In ecclesiastical Greek it expresses how the disciples of Jesus were called together as an assembly and in some cases, it is a synonym for the ecclesial community. St Chrysostom writes that the church is a name standing for walking together. He explains that the church is actually the assembly convoked to give God thanks and glory like a choir, a harmonic reality which holds everything together, since, by their reciprocal and ordered relations, those who compose it converge in common mind.[3]

[3] Cf. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 3.

Synodality, in a way is a style, a practice, a way of being church in history "*in the image of Trinitarian communion*" as Pope Francis tells us: "the practice of synodality, traditional but always to be renewed, is the implementation, in the history of the people of God on their journey, of the church as mystery of communion, in the image of Trinitarian communion. As you know this theme is very close to my heart: synodality is a style, it is walking together, and what the Lord expects of the church in the third millennium."[4]

Synodality was in fact the characteristic of the early church because in the first centuries many local synods and councils were organized to assemble the bishops to discuss and discern when the controversies and heresies had to be resolved. This means to say that the traditional church, both local and universal church governance was synodal and collegial.[5] Although synodality is not explicitly found as a term or as a concept in the teaching of Vatican II, it is fair to say that synodality is at the heart of the work of renewal the council was encouraging.

While the concept of synodality refers to the involvement and participation of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church, the concept of collegiality defines the theological significance and the form of the exercise of the ministry of bishops in the service of the local church entrusted to the care of each of them and of the communion between local churches at the heart of the one universal church of Christ, brought about by means of the hierarchical communion of the college of Bishops with the Bishop of Rome.[6]

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4 Francis, *Address to members of the International Theological* Commission, November 29 2019.

5 Cf. O'Malley, John, *When Bishops Meet: an essay comparing Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2019, 58.

6 International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 7.

This Synod, with its powerful theme, is a grace-filled opportunity for the people of God to go through a conversion experience and to journey with Jesus for a more just, inclusive, fraternal, free, equitable and peaceful world. Communion, participation and mission are the buzzwords not merely as empty rhetoric but to be actualized in every facet of our daily lives.

Communion: Closeness towards one another

The Catholic faith communities must see the ecumenical relevance of the synodal process, while it is important to deal first with the internal aspects of "communion," the all-embracing "koinonia" spirit must not be forgotten. Vatican II, as the seedbed of this synodal journey, since then, emphasized "in Christ the church is, as it were, the sacrament, that is, the sign and instrument for the most intimate union with God and for the unity of all humanity."[7] The Preparatory Document of the Synod states: "a synodal Church is a Church 'going forth,' a missionary Church 'whose doors are open.'[8] This includes the call to deepen relationships with other Churches and Christian communities, with which we are united by the one Baptism.

By his gracious will, God gathers us together as diverse peoples of one faith, through the covenant that he offers to his people. The communion we share finds its deepest roots in the love and unity of the Trinity. It is Christ who reconciles us to the Father and unites us with each other in the Holy Spirit. Together, we are inspired by listening to the Word of God, through the living Tradition of the Church, and grounded in the *sensus fidei* that we share. We all have a role to play in discerning and living out God's call for his people. It is about common sharing, fellowship. For a Christian, it has a much more powerful meaning: the courage to 'break bread',

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7 LG 1

8 EG 46.

to recognise Jesus in the breaking of bread and to share it with others. The Sacrament of the Eucharist. The two disciples with whom Jesus journeys with, on the road to Emmaus are able to recognise him only in the 'breaking of the bread'. Once the bread is broken it needs to be shared. At the Last Supper, Jesus also gives communion to Judas whom he knows is about to betray him. Communion is the grace to transcend our narrowness, selfishness, exclusiveness to reach out to others particularly the lost, least and last. It is the openness to realise that all are my sisters and brothers.[9]

Participation: Input and Involvement

A call for the involvement of all who belong to the People of God; laity, consecrated and ordained to engage in the exercise of deep and respectful listening to one another. This listening creates space for us to hear the Holy Spirit together, and guides our aspirations for the Church of the Third Millennium. Participation is based on the fact that all the faithful are qualified and are called to serve one another through the gifts they have each received from the Holy Spirit. In a synodal Church the whole community, in the free and rich diversity of its members, is called together to pray, listen, analyse, dialogue, discern and offer advice on making pastoral decisions which correspond as closely as possible to God's will. Genuine efforts must be made to ensure the inclusion of those at the margins or who feel excluded. It is about realising that you are an indispensable piece of a jigsaw puzzle. The picture is never complete without 'me' and 'you'. From the time Jesus opens the scroll in the Synagogue and reads from the Prophet Isaiah, he makes it amply clear what his mission is and invites us to participate in it. It has not been easy to do so. The Church is very clerical and patriarchal. The Synod, like Vatican II, is envisaged to be a bottoms-up approach. This will be relegated to mere words if those inside

9 *Journeying Together in Communion, Participation & Mission*, 2.

particularly Bishops and priests do not have the audacity to dare and to open the windows and the doors which they have locked from the inside.[10] True participation takes place only when others are given the opportunity to enter.

Mission: Task and Duty

The Church exists to evangelize. We can never be centered on ourselves. Our mission is to witness the love of God in the midst of the whole human family. This Synodal Process has a deep missionary dimension to it. It is intended to enable the Church to better witness to the Gospel, especially with those who live on the spiritual, social, economic, political, geographical, and existential peripheries of our world. In this way, synodality is a path by which the Church can more fruitfully fulfill her mission of evangelization in the world, as a leaven at the service of the coming of God's kingdom. Mission is going forth and also to send. It is a journey we are all called to undertake. To go out of ourselves: our Church Compounds, rituals and rites, our divisiveness and discriminatory attitudes, our arrogance and aggressiveness, our hate and violence. We are called to go forth: to build bridges rather than walls, to heal and not to wound, to love and not to hate. Mission is about journeying together for a common home in which justice, liberty, equality, fraternity, love, joy and peace are the rights of all! The journey will have difficulties – but one must continue walking it – till our pilgrimage here on earth has ended.

The Synod therefore is an opportune moment for every single family to come together in sharing and caring. It is the 'Amoris Laetitia' (the Joy of Love) Year. Families deepening bonds of nurturing and accepting each other. For the clergy, in creating an atmosphere of listening, dialogue and discernment in the parishes in the institutions.

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[10] *Journeying Together in Communion, Participation & Mission*, 4.

The ecclesiology of the Synodality

The core idea behind the Synod is the centrality of the ecclesiology of the people of God which was first introduced by Vat II and has been emphasized many times by Pope Francis. This idea he says, implies that the relationship between the People of and the church is not hierarchical anymore, that it is differentiated, but complementary. It implies that bishops need religious and lay people to accomplish their mission in the church: "this is what co-responsibility is all about." A synodal church is the pilgrim community of Christ's disciples who live in communion and actively participate in Christ's mission as a prophetic, priestly and kingly or servant mission. This is the proper context for discerning, deciding and acting together as a Christian Community at all levels – from the local, regional, universal levels. It is all about living in communion, it is all about participation in mission not just governance. It is both relationship-oriented as well as mission-oriented. It is action oriented, not just a matter of talking and discussing.

The process is important but so also is the outcome. The synodality of the Church is not just limited to what we do leading to the Synod of Bishops in 2023. It is not just coming up with new, inspiring document that would be forgotten after the synod. It is a continuing journey of making the Vatican II vision of a renewed Church a reality in our life and for the coming generation. All members of the church become agents of evangelization. Besides, synodality is at the heart of the ecumenical commitment of Christians, because it represents an invitation to walk together on the path towards full communion and because when it is understood correctly it offers a way of understanding and experiencing the Church where legitimate differences find room in the logic of a reciprocal exchange of gifts in the light of truth.

The Church must become Progressively Synodal

The Church must become increasingly synodal; capable of walking together, united in harmonious diversity, where everyone can actively participate. Pope Francis stresses that "Each of us shines like a star in the heart of God and in the firmament of the universe. At the same time, though, we are called to form constellations that can guide and light up the path of humanity, beginning with the places in which we live." This is the mystery of the Church: a celebration of differences, a sign, and instrument of all that humanity is called to be. Thus, the Church must become increasingly synodal: capable of walking together, united in harmonious diversity, where everyone can actively participate and where everyone has something to contribute.

All of us are called to share in Christ's mission to reunite a fragmented humanity and to reconcile it with God. Each man and woman, even before encountering Christ and embracing the Christian faith, receives with the gift of life a fundamental calling: each of us is a creature willed and loved by God; each of us has a unique and special place in the mind of God. At every moment of our lives, we are called to foster this divine spark, present in the heart of every man and woman, and thus contribute to the growth of a humanity inspired by love and mutual acceptance.

Ecumenical commitment to Synodality

Ecumenism, or the promotion of Christian unity, is an integral part of the Synodal journeying together, on which the Catholic Church has embarked under the visionary leadership of our beloved Pope Francis. The Church Unity Octave that is celebrated in the Northern Hemisphere between 18 and 25 January every year, was established in 1966, shortly after Vatican II. This was a joint venture of the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches that was established in 1948 with 350 member churches. However,

as with most Gospel values and Vatican II teachings, the seeds of ecumenism have been strewn by the wayside, devoured by the birds of the air, and therefore have not reaped the desired harvest of a hundredfold.[11]

The Synod must re-establish that unity among Christians for which the Lord had prayed in his farewell discourse (cf Jn 17:21). Echoing Vatican II and we need to deepen our relationships with other Christian Churches with whom we are united in baptism; as dialogue with them has a special place in the Synodal journey. It is good to remind ourselves that "We are in the same boat as one human family in our common home" So obviously if we don't swim together, we will sink together. Perhaps this is also a warning to those among us who pick holes in the functioning of other Churches. In the ecumenical field we need to consider the variety of conditions in different regions of the world. Unity in diversity. We cannot allow ethnicity, race or caste to have a negative impact on our "Journeying Together". In a country like India, we need to open ourselves to the plurality.

Renewed synodality is an ecumenical commitment which involves the whole People of God and calls for a conversion of heart and openness to each other, in order to demolish the walls of diffidence which have separated Christians from each other for centuries and in order to discover, share and rejoice in the many riches which unite us as gifts of the one Lord in virtue of the baptism we share (No. 115). Ecumenical theological dialogue, especially with the Orthodox Church, emphasizes the importance of synodality in the first millennium of the Church.

Like in the Magnificat, we must break the rigidity of having leaders and followers, for "He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones

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[11] Chhotebhai, Synod on Synodality: Ecumenism Integral to Synodality, 2.

and lifted up the lowly" (Lk 1:52). As such, neither big nor small, we are all protagonists; and no one can be considered a mere extra. Hence it is imperative to move from the previous pyramidal structure of the Church to the fraternal model as envisaged by Vatican II. Pope Francis said that this was not a case of "Some of the bishops some of the time, but all of the Church, all the time." If power is not shared it will be snatched away one day, as happened in the French Revolution. Bro Alois of the Taize community in France said that "We need to recognize our own weaknesses and ask other Churches to help us receive what we lack. This is called receptive ecumenism, which allows us to welcome what comes from others."[12] It was providential that the Church got involved in ecumenism since Vatican II. There have since been bilateral dialogues with15 different Churches, wherein much progress has been made. Despite differences there are areas of commonality where the Churches stand together for certain social principles and ideas.

Ecumenism, like synodality, cannot be a top to down approach. It must begin at the local or grassroots level. Hence bishops must find ways of bringing representatives of other churches into the synodal process. For this one would need to adapt to local circumstances. For this the Catholic Church on its part must reach out to other Churches and tell them about our Synodal process and their part in it. This is a challenge for the bishops and clergy and must be accepted.

The fruits of synodality

The fruits of the synodality for the Church are many**.** First of all, synodality honours the maturity, dignity and equality of all Christians. Too often, it is a small but powerful group that made the decisions

[12] https://www.mangalorean.com/synod-on-synodality-vi-ecumenism-integral-to-synodality, accessed on 22/07/2022

on behalf of entire peoples who were then obliged to obey. A Church modelled on mutual listening and reconciled diversity can help the civil society to be built up in justice and fraternity, and thus bring about a more beautiful and human world for coming generations.[13] Secondly, the process promotes Christian unity, even where differences occur. Respecting the diversity of perspectives allows for broadening of one's understanding and deepening of the truth in particular situations. Ideology is outranked by addressing the particular reality. Also, by allowing openness and free expression of challenges, obstacles and problems, so also solutions can be worked out together, in a win-win way. Finally, the synodal process is truly missionary. As the Spirit inspires in the listening and discernment, so also are the participants—young people, families, peoples of the Amazon are inspired in going out to give witness to the love of God. Synodality inspires evangelization, true joy in Christ and relevance of the Church in a very practical way.

Conclusion

Today, the Indian church is situated within an increasingly complex socioeconomic and religio-cultural reality. On the one hand, India's cherished values of democracy, secularism, and religious diversity are being threatened by the forces of radical Hindu fundamentalism. On the other hand, the Indian church itself is divided by ethnic, linguistic, caste, gender, and ritual boundaries. These concerns call for rigorous theological discourse that advances an adequate self-understanding of the church in India. We can envision a communion of local churches, one which welcomes and affirms the distinct identity of each language group, ethnicity, caste, culture, and rite; encourages solidarity and mutual support; and strengthens a coordinated commitment to the church's prophetic presence in a pluralistic India.

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[13] Cf. https://www.licas.news/2022/05/06/church-must-become-increasingly-synodal-says-pope-francis, accessed on 20/7/2022.

The Indian church, fostering a genuine encounter among the various rites, cultures, language groups, and ethnicities, will transform itself into an inclusive community and bear witness to one Body of Christ, unified in its splendid diversity. Pope Francis calls for the theology of encounter, he calls us to move to the peripheries to empower the alienated and excluded, his fierce critique of unfettered capitalism, and his call for synodal structures to be mirrored in civil society. Pope Francis effectively announces an ethics of 'welfare of all' which coincides with his vision of the Kingdom of God, whose realization is the very basis of evangelization.

In short, the synodal ecclesiology of Pope Francis, which is marked by decentralization, participation, subsidiarity, and encounter provide an underlying vision for a new way of being church in India today, one which fosters unity and reconciliation within the church itself, and becomes a force for the welfare of all in Indian society. Let us all become part of this synodal journey and live in unity and harmony.

Communion for Mission: Understanding the Human Community

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Introduction

The Vatican II has brought the Catholic Church to a much wider perspective of the modern world. Being in the world, the Church is bound to be affected by the changes taking place in the world. The Vatican II is undoubtedly the consequential effect of the phenomenon called the *Renaissance* known as "re-birth" in the history of the world that had changed the whole outlook of man: of himself, of the political, social and economic structures of his era. Powered by scientific discovery and the enlightenment movement of the era, this "re-birth" shook the foundations of the medieval spirituality and political institutions and puts an end to the blind adherence to the code of these medieval institutions replaced by logical reasoning and a spirit of inquiry. It is the Renaissance that has opened the gates to the Protestant Reformation movement. The upshot of the upheaval created by the reform movement is the splintered Catholic Church which resulted in the launching of various reform movements within the Catholic Church as a corrective measure to check the corruption in the Church and to prevent developments of more disintegration within itself. As stated by *Fraternal Life in Community*, the Vatican II which have brought new waves of changes responding to the signs of the times, among all efforts for reform in the Church, is the most significant one that is still shaping the modern Catholic Church

and the religious life. It reinforced the missionary mandate of the Church and urges the Church to engage in all the forces of the modern world. The Second Vatican Council, as an event of grace and the greatest expression of the Church's pastoral guidance in this century, has had a decisive influence on religious life.[1]

The operation of the Church was updated which involved the shedding off of its narrow attitude to the world and the mission. The Vatican II provided directives to the Church and the religious institutions, new ways of being leaven in the world with openness and direct involvement.

The new directives were communicated to the religious world through various documents such as *Perfectae Caritatis*, *Optatam Totius*, *Ad gentes Divinitus*, *Gaudium et Spes*, etc. Appropriate renewal of religious life was particularly addressed in *Perfectae Caritatis*.[2] It states that the Constitutions and Directories of Institutes should be brought in line with the Conciliar documents, while still keeping their proper characters, traditions and functions as Religious Institutes. The Church through *Perfectae Caritatis* gave a new focus to the human person taking into consideration the psychological condition of the individual. It recommends that:

> The manner of life, of prayer and of work should be in harmony with the present-day physical and psychological condition of the members. It should also be in harmony with the needs of the apostolate, in the measure that the nature of the institute requires, with the requirement of culture and with social economic circumstances. This

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1 *Fraternal life in Community*, Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 1.

2 Second Vatican Council, *Perfectae Caritatis*, Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life (28 October 1965), Post Concilliar Document, ed., Austin Flannery (Mumbai: St. Paul Publications, 2013).

should be the case everywhere, but especially in the mission territories.[3]

In this way the document introduced the concept of religious freedom applying reasonability and good sense in drawing up measures for their involvement in the mission of the modern world responding to the change of the times. The old ways of functioning are to be shed off to cater to the needs of the changes in the environment.

Such a move of the Church to be open to the world and its changes demands that the religious persons and the religious communities who are workers in the vineyard of the Lord are to adapt themselves to modernity without losing the essential elements of religious life. This entails change of outlook, attitudes and the whole thinking pattern to newer ideas and creatively adapt and apply them in the religious life and mission. The psyche of the individual religious which was neglected so far, the apostolate of the institutes, the requirement of culture with socio-economic circumstances are the elements which should not be ignored in religious communities in order to have harmonious living together for a fruitful mission. The aspect of communion in the religious community is the assurance for a fruitful apostolic life. Basic knowledge on the human psyche is a very essential element in order to bring about communion among the members. Such understanding of the dynamics of oneself and the dynamics of the community itself will enhance communion which entails fruitful mission.

First of all, it is to be noted that religious community is one form of consecrated life that calls for commitment to live in community.

Religious Life: A Commitment to live in Community

Religious Life is characterised by a stable form of community life as stated by the *Evangelica Testificatio*.

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[3] *Perfectae Caritatis*, 3.

> Religious life" is one form of Consecrated life with a special commitment to live in community. A stable form of community life in an institute canonically erected by the competent ecclesiastical authority manifests in a visible way the covenant and communion which religious life expresses. "For religious, communion in Christ is expressed in a stable and visible way through community life. So important is community living to religious consecration that every religious, whatever his or her apostolic work, is bound to it by the fact of profession and must normally live under the authority of a local superior in a community of the institute to which he or she belongs. Normally, too, community living entails a daily sharing of life according to specific structures and provisions established in the constitutions. Sharing of prayer, work, meals, leisure, common spirit, "relationships of friendship, cooperation in the same apostolate, and mutual support in community of life chosen for a better following of Christ, are so many valuable factors in daily progress.[4]

Religious community has its models in the Trinity, the early Christians and the First Christian community.

Communion: The Core of Christianity and Religious Life

Communion is the vital element of Christian faith. It is at the core of Christianity. Christianity is the participation in the communion of God and with his brother and sisters (1Jn 1:1-3). Religious life as it has been stated earlier is a special call to live in community and it corresponds to the form of life followed by the disciples of Jesus.[5] This common life which is Trinitarian in character is also fashioned on the model of the first Christian community where the body of believers was united in heart and soul (cf. Acts 4:32).

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4 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelica Testificatio (ET),* Paul VI, 1971, 39.

5 *Perfectae Caritatis*, 15a.

As members of Christ living together as brothers or sisters, religious should give pride of place in esteem to each other (cf. Rom. 12:10) and bear each other's burdens (cf. Gal. 6:2). A community is a true family gathered together in the name of the Lord. It is love binds this family and it is love that sums up the whole law (cf. Rom. 13:10), binds all together in perfect unity (cf. Col. 3:14). Furthermore, the unity of the members is a visible pledge that Christ will return (cf. John 13:35; 17:21) and a source of great apostolic energy.[6]

The Religious Community Today[7]

The religious community today is influenced by the social and ecclesiastical realities as stated by the document, *Fraternal Life in Community* which made a comprehensive study of the religious communities in the modern world. The document said that individuals which made up of this community are faced with a tension between communitarian and individualism in the personal, social, and world level.

At a social level there is a tendency for communion and individualism. There is a sense of insecurity and solitude. So, on the one hand, people look for support and security in others. On the other hand, there is a tendency of division in the name of religion, caste, language, etc.

At the level of the world there are many factors which unites the human beings and the communication and information technologies has made the world a global village. At the same time, there are separatist and fanatic movements which fight for autonomy while simultaneously, there is a felt need for interdependence economically and politically.

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6 *Perfectae Caritatis*, 15a.

7 *Fraternal Life in Community*, 1-7.

At a personal level there is a tendency in individuals to identify themselves with groups such as political, social, members of sports club, fans club, etc. But at the same time there is also the individualistic tendency to be alone. Though a human being seeks help, comfort and companionship from others, at the same time, she wants to maintain her interdependence, liberty, freedom, capacity to raise her voice against the group and leave the group. Interestingly, we find the same even in religious life and are a challenge today.

A Cursory Glance at the Reality of Religious Community Today

Religious community is a school to discover one's truest and deepest selves. The innate social orientation of the human heart, though denied mostly, nonetheless gives each member a desire for support of shared ideals and vision. In communal life, there are ambivalent desires. There is both an intense desire for improved quality of communal life and a sense of fear or resistance surrounding it. Persons are caught up in these two divergent realities. This is reflected in the quality of life lived by religious in the present time. These divergent tendencies evoke one to question the relationship between community life and mission, their relevance and importance. Progressive movement towards the goal is difficult in this state. Much energy is spent in questioning power and authority and this frustrating exercise has a negative impact in the mission. The apostolic work suffers. Many communities could be better termed as "hotels" where individual members come together only to eat and stay and the rest of their lives are spent in their own individual apostolate and programs. It is hard to make a reality what the Psalmist envisaged in Psalm 133:1: "How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity."

Religious life and religious community generally is studied and linked with the spiritual. Its human element is often neglected. While

making a reflection on the religious community today, it is fundamental to accommodate the human psychological discoveries of the contemporary world. The religious needs to be updated with these to have at least a basic knowledge about oneself and the psychological makeup of the individuals in the community along with the dynamics of the community collectively. An enlightened awareness of the intricacies of a human mind is required. It should be noted that the ones who make the religious community are basically human beings with all psychological complexities.

Understanding Community Dynamics

We find certain dynamics present in religious community as in any group. It is very important to understand them as it can help us to evaluate its vitality, its challenges and setbacks and do the necessary to move forward. Certain concepts from the social psychology and group dynamics are employed to help us understand the community dynamics.

Group

The term 'Group' is the basic concept that needs to be clarified. "A group is a collection of persons who have some common bond arising from a distinctive set of social relations. It is not merely the sum total of the individuals who constitute it. Each group is an entity, with a nature of its own. It has a specific form and structure, a history, and aims."[8] This group can be divided into primary groups and secondary groups. A primary group is based on primary relationships, eg. families and significant persons. There is freedom of relating, persons are totally accepted for themselves, there is no substitution possible and their deepest needs are fulfilled.[9]

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8 G. Manly, "Realistic Community Expectations" In *Human Development* Vol. 2, No. 2, Summer (1981), 34.

9 Cf. G. Manly, "Realistic Community Expectations," 35.

The secondary group differs from primary group. It is a "group consisting of persons who share some values and have some common standards of behaviour but only with respect to limited segments of their lives."[10] In the secondary group rules govern their conduct, roles are valued, people are interchangeable and the deepest needs are not met. It should be noted that primary groups can develop within a secondary group that has been together long enough for strong bonds to form among members.[11] Therefore, religious communities can have the characteristics of both primary and secondary groups. The community members are come together for a common purpose being bound by the ties of a founder of the institute.

Group Dynamics

Group dynamics is "a field of inquiry dedicated to advancing knowledge about the nature of groups, the laws of their development, and their interrelations with individuals, other groups, and larger institutions."[12] In simple language it refers to the interaction among members of a group, each of whom depends on others. In the course of living together, the group with its written as well as unwritten laws exert pressure on a person to change behaviour. At the same time the person also influences the group when change occurs. This includes also the "study of group processes focusing on issues such as power, power shifts, leadership, group formation, how one group reacts to other groups, cohesiveness and decision-making."[13] In the setting of a religious community this could be considered as the "dynamic interaction

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10 A. Reber, E. Reber, *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*, 3rd Ed., 309.

11 Cf. G. Manly, "Realistic Community Expectations", *Human Development*, 35-36.

12 Forsyth, D. R. (2014). *Group dynamics* (6th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 18.

13 *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*, 3rd Ed., 308.

between the intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics of needs, attitudes and values."[14] These are the specific areas where one can understand one's own self, her own dynamics from the way she manages with the dynamics in the community. This determines the perseverance and effectiveness of each member in the religious community. The unconscious dynamics occurring in the community must be identified by those animators of the community. This knowledge enhances both personal and communal growth. If the dynamics within the community is not recognised and understood, problems crop up having the potential to destroy the group. Healthy community living is a sure means to have healthy interaction with the world outside, the mission field. If problems are not solved the recipients are affected. Thus, problems are to be attended to at the initial stage.

The Essence of Religious Community

The essence of community, "union with" or "common" connotes an in-depth recognition of a union that is shared by all the members of a particular group. So, the real essence of community is union of minds and hearts.[15] Religious community as mentioned earlier is featured by consecration, charismatic nature, the common life, and the grace of being together. Being a community of consecrated people, the religious community is composed of people who have built their lives around the evangelical counsels as a particular way for perfecting charity. Thus, there is a call to renew and transcend marked by theological self-transcendence not just psychologically. Being a charismatic community, it is a founding character of the founder that unites the members. This evolves from a common call to share the same charism with other members.

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14 L.M. Rulla, *Depth Psychology and Vocation*, E.P.U.G., (Rome 2003) 4th Reprint, 96.

15 Cf. J. Malone, "What Is Community?" In *Human Development*, Vol. 13, No. 2, Summer (1992), 6-7.

At the root of every religious family is the particular experience of the founder. Another element is the life in common which is a special characteristic of religious life making it visible in a stable common life. This has to be imbibed during the years of formation. Another important element is concerned with how the relationship between its members are established. And so, we can say that religious community is an ecclesial communion bound together by the profession of the evangelical counsels for perfecting charity with a specific charism and mission and that it has no prior human bonds. The relations between its members are motivated only by the call of grace.[16]

Healthy Communal Life for a Fruitful Mission

Religious persons who are basically human beings are pulled by two divergent realities of life: the ideal self that aims towards the noble and the spiritual and the actual self that is made up of the daily psychological struggles of life and various other limitations posed by the dissonant needs. With the underlying tensions within, the religious depending on God's grace strives to fulfil the demands placed on her by her consecration. She is to be imbued with the apostolic spirit to proclaim the Gospel. To make that possible she needs to have a healthy personal and communal life as her very being and life should be a reflection of what she preaches. This is the reason why communal life has to be healthy and happy. The very nature of religious institute is apostolic as stated by the magisterium:

> The very nature of the religious institutes requires "apostolic activity and charitable services."[17] By the fact of their consecration, the members are dedicated to God and

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16 Cf. F. Ciardi, *KOINONIA Spirituality and Theology of the Growth of Religious Community,* Claretian Publications (Quezon City 1999), 283-287.

17 *Perfectae Caritatis,* 8.

> available to be sent. Their vocation implies the active proclamation of the Gospel through "works of charity that are entrusted to the institute by the Church and are to be performed in her name."[18] For this reason, the apostolic activity of such institutes is not simply a human effort to do good but "an action that is deeply ecclesial."[19] "The entire religious life of such religious should be imbued with an apostolic spirit, and all their apostolic activity with a religious spirit."[20]

Such is the mandate of the magisterium to the religious. In order to make this possible the human person, the community collectively and the apostolate of the community are to have mutual understanding among themselves to carry out their mission through dialogical listening deciding what is best for the community and the mission. Dialogical listening will enhance unity and a fruitful mission. The various defence mechanisms reaction formation, projection, displacement, undoing, isolation, sublimation and denial and the psychic needs such as abasement, succorance, aggression, nurturance, counteraction, affiliation, etc. are the drives that are at play within the operation of the interpersonal relationship. All these contribute to the fabric of community life leading towards the good or the bad. This is the reason why one must have the wisdom and understanding to identify these defence mechanisms in oneself and in others and to deal with them in a healthy manner to promote healthy communal life. For instance, one of the ways of reducing trifle conflicts and one way of showing understanding could be by giving space to the person to go through the emotional turmoil without judging the person. The time taken to resolve the emotional turmoil depends on the psychic makeup of each person.

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18 *Perfectae Caritatis,* 8.

19 *Evangelii Nuntiandi,* 60.

20 *Perfectae Caritatis,* 8.

In this way the person feels accepted and she is encouraged to be true to herself. She is accepted for what she is.

Community goes through developmental process. A community can become fixated at any stage and can regress to an earlier stage. All members need not be at the same stage. At the beginning stage the members explore the acceptable and unacceptable norms of the group. Some relate freely while some take time to be free. This interaction depends on the operation of the needs within the psyche of the individual. There is a certain fear, discomfort and anxiety in the beginning. The community then grows from the uncertainty to inclusion, conflict, control, cohesion and intimacy. Sense of belonging, sense of alienation, fights and flight, tension and frustration in conflict are what is taking place in living together. These when dealt with in a healthy manner can bring closer bonds and cohesiveness among the members. It requires strong commitment, knowledge, intelligence to understand oneself and others and conviction from the part of the members as well as the animator to build a community.

Conclusion

Groups mediate the connection between the individuals and society at large. Behaviour is the function of both the person and the environment. Therefore, a profound knowledge is to be sought on the psychic realities of a human being and an attentive understanding is to be given to the individuals to build a healthy community life as the members affect each other in their interpersonal relationship. This will ultimately lead to a more loving and enthusiastic involvement in the mission of the Church which bear lasting fruit.

Family: A Fundamental Element in the Synodal Journey of the Church

Sr. Shida Nongsiej MSMHC

Introduction

To many Catholics, the term 'synod' or 'synodality' has perhaps created some confusion in their minds. This is possibly because they have misunderstood the concept. In fact, some wondered why the Catholic Church leaders introduced this new term. Many thought that 'synod' is a term used only by the Protestants. But as the synodal journey continues the real meaning of the term, its importance and the aim for which Pope Francis declared 2021-2023 as the years for synodality in the church was explained and people began to understand and feel privileged and proud to be part of the Holy Catholic Church. It is a joy to know that we are not alone in our faith journey, but we are together - journeying together in faith. Synodality describes the journeying together of the People of God. It is a way of living the faith in a permanent way at every level: in the family, in the parish, in the communities, societies and in the peripheries. When Pope Francis opened the synod in October 2021,[1] he desired to hear the voice of the entire Church. He called for mutual listening. He felt sure that the Spirit would guide the Church and give us the grace to walk forward together, united in the mission sharing and listening to one another.

[1] Brian Thornton, "For a Synodal Church" in *Insight Out: Synodality, Laity, Pope Francis- What's It All About?*, (Toronto: University of St. Michael's College, 2021), 1.

Understanding Synodality: Meaning, Background, Aim and Uniqueness

'Synod' is an ancient and venerable word in the tradition of the Church.[2] It comes from a Greek word *syn-hodos,* which means "the same way" or "the same path".[3] It indicates the path along which the People of God walk together. Equally, it refers to the Lord Jesus who presents Himself as 'the way, the truth and the life' (Jn 14: 6), and to the fact that Christians, who are His followers, are called to walk together as they follow the Master. A synod is a gathering or an assembly, traditionally of bishops, that helps the Church to walk forward together in the same direction. Synods were common in the first centuries of Christianity, giving bishops the opportunities to meet and discuss issues of importance for the life of the Church.[4] The synod on synodality which Pope Francis officially declared on 7th March 2021 is completely different from the past synods. It is not about addressing a particular issue but about becoming who God calls us to be as a Church. It is a synodal process for the entire people of God. Synodality enables the entire People of God to walk forward together, listening to the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, to participate in the mission of the Church in the communion that Christ establishes between us.[5] This path of walking together is the most effective way of manifesting and putting into practice the nature of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God.

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2 "For a Synodal Church: Communion, participation and Mission" in *Vademacum* (Vatican City: September 2021), 9.

3 Cf. Nicholas Jesson, "Synodality in Life and Mission of the Church," in *A Primer on Synodality: One Body*, September, 2021, 1; "Synodality" https://en.m.wikipedia.org.wiki accessed on 26.05.2022.

4 Brian Thornton, "For a Synodal Church", 1-2.

5 *Preparatory Document for the 16th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishop*, 2021, 1.

Synodality in the Scriptures

The concept 'synod' or 'synodality' is already found in the Scriptures. The Bible itself is filled with stories and ideas about "walking together" or "journeying together". In Genesis we read that God did not intend for man to be alone from the beginning; that is why he provided him with a suitable partner (2:18). God intended them to walk with him, collaborating with him, and to be in communion with him, particularly in the task of caring for the rest of creation. When sin entered, however, this relation began to fall apart. God's love and mercy on the other hand led him to restore the path of unity by establishing a covenant with them.[6] The Lord carried out this plan by summoning Abraham and his descendants, from whom God's people were formed. On Mount Sinai, He made a covenant with them. God's first call for a synod was made in this newly formed community (Exodus 19:24). The community of God's people includes all types of people the judges, the elders, the Levites, the women, children and even foreigners. In the New Testament, Jesus is always on a journey. He shares God's truth with everyone the outcasts, the poor, the downcast, the sick, the widows, the orphans, the physically incapable, the oppressed, the sinners and even the gentiles who have expressed deep faith in him like the Canaanite woman and the Roman Centurion (Mt 15:21-28, 6-13). He approaches and listens to all with love and compassion which is a synodal expression of Jesus ministry. He also walks with his disciples on the way to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35), he shares his power and ministry with his apostles. In the Acts of the Apostles, the disciples discerned the will of the Lord by listening to the voice of the Spirit in order to carry out their various roles. In Jerusalem, an assembly was called, and a discussion and debate ensued until they reached a unanimous decision. These acts of gathering, listening and discernment as a community in which everyone plays an active role through their various contributions exemplifies the concept of journeying

together, and serves as a paradigm for the synodal approach of the Church in our times.[7]

Family and the Synod in God's perspective

The entire People of God shares a common dignity and vocation through baptism. All who are baptized are called in virtue of Baptism to be active participants in the life of the Church.[8] The family is the image of God who is a communion of persons. At Christ's baptism, the Father's voice is heard, calling Jesus his beloved Son, and in this love, we can recognize the Holy Spirit. (Mk 1:10-11). Again, in the Gospel of Matthew Chapter 19 Jesus says that once united in marriage the husband and wife will no more be two but one. This oneness, which is the reflection of the Trinity in the family, is the fundamental experience of synodality.[9] The synodal life of the Church in the Scriptures and tradition show that God's plan of salvation is fulfilled in Jesus Christ the Son of God who was born in a family. The mission of the Church requires the entire People of God, made in His own image and likeness, born into God's family by the sacrament of baptism, to journey together, with each member playing his or her vital role to preserve the unity and communion with each other in Christ.

Family: Synodal Unit of the Church

"The Church is God's family in the world" said Pope Benedict XVI, in *Deus Caritas Est*, 25 and "she serves as a leaven and as a kind of soul for human society as it is to be renewed in Christ

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6 Cf. "Synodality in Scripture" *https://rcasf.com/synod-updates/synodalityscripture/* accessed on May 31, 2021.

7 *Vademacum*, 9.

8 Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, Post- Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on The Joy of Love (Trivandrum: Carmelite International Publishing House, 2016), 71.

9 Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 7 December 1965, 40.

and transformed into God's family". [10] In this way, the spouses are consecrated and by means of a special grace build up the Body of Christ and form a domestic church. The blessing and responsibility of a family, sealed in the Sacrament of Matrimony, involve the couple's willingness to be advocates and promoters, within the Christian community. In society, the willingness to beget children, to protect the weak and to live a life in common, involves a responsibility that should be supported, acknowledged and appreciated. So, in virtue of the Sacrament of Matrimony, every family becomes, in effect, a good for the Church. From this vantage point, considering the interplay between the family and the Church will be a precious gift for the Church at the present time: the Church is good for the family; the family is good for the Church. In fact, the Church is where family is. The strength of the Church resides in the strength of the family. The Church, in order to fully understand the mystery, looks to the Christian family, which manifests her in a real way.[11] Pope Paul VI describes the family as 'a domestic Church'.[12] So, a Catholic family is the basic unit of the Catholic Church. What does not characterize a Catholic family cannot characterize the Church. The family is a synodal unit of the Church and thereby stands at the intersection of the Church and the world with the task of familiarizing humanity, of "domesticating' the world with the power of love and service.[13]

The teaching of the Church about the family is found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In the Catholic Church the family is often called the principal cell or building block of human society. It is the place where our Catholic faith is handed on and

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10 Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 21 November 1964, 11.

11 John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio,* Apostolic Exhortation on Family, 22 November 1981, 290.

12 *Amoris Laetitia*, 183.

13 *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* n.1603.

lived. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "The vocation of marriage is written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator".[14] And it further states, "In creating man and woman, God instituted the human family and endowed it with its fundamental constitution". The Catholic Church also teaches that Christian love is sacrificial. As Jesus demonstrated his dying on the cross, parents and children are called to make sacrifices for each other. Family is the first place where children can learn about love, companionship and forgiveness. Catholics give special importance to family values such as unity, fidelity and respect both within the domestic family unit and in the church family. Catholics believe the church community is strengthened by the procreation of families.[15] Families can play an important role in the community as well. They can provide support for other families, care for the elderly and adopt children. Families lovingly accept the difficult trial of a child with special needs. They render the Church and society an invaluable witness of faithfulness to the gift of life. The families can also discover together with the Christian community new approaches, new ways of acting, different ways of understanding and identifying with others by welcoming and caring for the mystery of the frailty of human life.[16] To sum up, families play a significant role in nurturing, caring and protecting human life from the womb to the tomb. Thus, the previous Synod on the Family emphasized four general tasks for the family. They are (i) forming a community of persons, (2) serving life, (3) participating in the development of society, and (4) sharing in the life and mission of the Church.[17]

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14 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2203.

15 *Amoris Laetitia*, 47.

16 Cf. "Family Become What You Are" in https://www.piercedhearts.org- accessed in June 2 2022.

17 *Amoris Laetitia*, 31.

The Role of the Family in the Synodal Church

Synodality, as mentioned earlier, is about journeying together, seeking communion, calling for the participation of everybody, in order to be a missionary church. The family possesses a key role in this synodality. Every member of the Church is first a member of a family. The same member of the family becomes a member of the Church. Just as we cannot think of a society without a family we cannot think of a Church without a family or marriage either. The family is a bridge within the community, in the Church and outside the Church. The welfare of the family is decisive for the future of the world and that of the Church.[18] The family is the first place where the faith is interpreted, learned and lived. The formation of every member happens first and foremost in a family. Hence, synodality does not make any sense, if it is not learnt and practiced in the family. The family is an agent of the Church's mission and synodality through which its explicit proclamation of the Gospel and its legacy of varied forms of witness are realized. Thus, solidarity with the poor, openness to a diversity of people, the protection of creation, moral and material solidarity with other families, commitment to the promotion of the common good and the transformation of unjust social structures, beginning in the territory in which family live, through the practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy become real in and through the family.[19] The experience of love in families is a perennial source of strength for the life of the Church.[20] A family influences the happiness and wellbeing of its members, impacts the society around them and continues to have significance even after death. When we focus on journeying together in the Church, families become conduits of peace and justice. It is there that we speak the truth with love, we invite mirth and play, we encourage one another in

18 *Amoris Laetitia*, 200, 290.
19 *Amoris Laetitia*, 88.

holiness, we hold one another accountable, we forgive one another more easily, and we celebrate and mourn together. In these ways, we mirror Christ's patient and joyful love for his Church.[21] The Church needs families to take to heart this call to evangelize and to actively participate in the walking and journeying together as a pilgrim people of God.

As by the Sacrament of Matrimony, every family becomes, in effect, a good for the Church, families are invited to participate in the Church's mission in a unique and privileged manner. The Church considers the family as a partner in her redeeming mission.[22] When Pope Paul VI called the family, 'a domestic Church' he declares that every Christian family must embody the various features and characteristics of the Universal Church. The family like the Church must always be regarded as a centre to which the Gospel must be brought and from which it must be proclaimed. In a family, which is conscious that all the members are called to be evangelizers and to be evangelized, there will be commitment to bringing the Gospel to other families and to wider society. It is therefore important to make the *kerygma* resonate in every family which will enable them to be a true domestic church and a leaven of evangelization in society.[23] The family educates the children for life in such a way that each one may fully perform his or her role according to the vocation received from God. Indeed, the family that is open to transcendent values becomes the primary and most excellent seedbed of vocations to consecrated life.

Conclusion

Pope Francis invites the People of God into a Synodal process and it is imperative that every level of the Church is fully engaged

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21 Kim, "How families can serve the Church" in *4 Tasks of Catholic Family, Radiant Faith*, 2020.

22 *Familiaris Consortio,* 53

23 *Familiaris Consortio* 290

in this call. Every member of the Church is challenged by the call to mutual listening, where each has something to learn, as they listen to each other and to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth (Jn14:17) in order to know what He is saying to the Church. In this regard families play a pivotal role. The contributions that families make are commendable. As we have noted our families serve the Church by receiving, believing, living and announcing the Word of God in our homes and beyond. Furthermore, our families have not only a private mission of serving and loving one another, nor do they only have a social mission of serving in communities, engaging in political life. They have an important ecclesial mission. To participate in the synodal Church concretely every member of the family ought to be Christ-like in his or her approach, attitudes, dealings, relationships, words and actions and strive to love each other and embrace all humanity with the heart of Christ.

Prayer and Spiritual Growth

Sr. Mary Chandan Msmhc

Introduction

It is important to understand that a person's religious beliefs provide parameters regarding spiritual growth, but having religious beliefs is not in and of itself equal to spirituality. That is, a person may be religious, possessing intellectual knowledge, and yet not be spiritual. However, an individual cannot become more spiritual than his or her religious beliefs. The best one could achieve is equality between the two. For instance, a person who possesses little knowledge about his or her religion is limited in spiritual growth by that lack of knowledge. He or she may fully integrate what is known intellectually but will grow no further if religious beliefs are not also increased. So, to grow or mature, a person must be gaining knowledge of his or her standard, and at the same time integrating that knowledge with one's spirituality. In this sense spiritual growth is a continual process but may be stopped at any point a person stops pursing it in prayer.

In this article, we will be discussing on the various aspects of prayers and spirituality. As Catholics, we must realize that if we wish to grow spiritually, we cannot follow the paths or the ideas of other religions. No amount of mediation or renunciation of the world, no amount of right living or the following of laws will achieve for us the spiritual growth we yearn for. We must understand that our spiritual growth comes from one source that we grow spiritually in one way alone: by accepting the infinite outpouring of love and

grace offered to us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

1.1 Prayer: An Overall Understanding

Religious life constantly marks with Prayer and devotion. They are always in embrace of God's love by responding. In prayer they are intimately in union with God. It is God's greatest gift to them to be in union at all time for the glory of God and for the salvation of souls. In the following point, deals with prayer, its importance and the different types of prayer.

1.1.1 What is Prayer?

"Prayer" is a word and a concept everybody is familiar with. It is personal encounter with our creator in disaster, joys, success, as well as in every moment of one's life.[1] Prayer is turning the heart toward God. When a person prays, he enters a living relationship with God[2]. Prayer is the great gate leading into faith. Someone who prays no longer lives on his own, for himself, and by his own strength. He knows there is a God to whom he can talk. People who pray entrust themselves more and more to God. Therefore, the effort to pray daily is part of Christian life. Prayer is a gift one obtains through prayer. Many Christians believe that nothing happens apart from prayer.[3] Jesus Himself advised His friends to pray that God's will be done on earth as it is done in heaven. Prayer is more than merely talking to God; in fact, praying to God is the most intimate thing you can do in your faith. As one prays, all is laid bare before his heavenly Father. There is nothing he can

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1 Cf. Francis, "Conclusion of the Holy Mass," *L'Ossrvatore Romano* (1 October 2016), 6.

2 Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1994), 2558-2565, 462. (Hereafter referred as CCC)

3 Michael J. Miller, *YOUCAT* English, Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2010, Pattloch Verlag GmbH and Co. KG, Munich, 297.

hide from God when he prays. Prayer is a desire to do God's will. In other words, prayer is the love of man longing to get united with the love of God (1Jn. 4:8). It's more an act of the heart than to the mind.[4] St. Teresa of Avila writes in her Life, "I will only observe that prayer is the door to those great favors which He has bestowed upon me."[5] Therefore, prayer opens into the mystery of God and at the same time it becomes the means of communion with Him.

In order to grow in holiness of life, Venerable Bishop Stephen Ferrando the founder of the religious congregation, Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians, exhorted his spiritual daughters, "The more we love Him, the more we long to be united to Him, and the more we long to pray."[6] Bishop Ferrando being himself a man of prayer wanted his sisters to cultivate the same spirit as his, a preferential love for God above everything. The first and most principal duty of all religious is the contemplation of things divine and constant union with God in prayer.[7] Prayer can be personal as well as community. It differs from person to person and place to place. Prayer represents the human side of the hypothesized two-way communication between people and their God or gods. What people think about their God or gods, so they do in prayer.[8] It's a means to reach God and which enables a

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4 Cf. Antonisamy, *An Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Mumbai: St. Paul Press Training School 2003), 54.

5 Antonisamy, *An Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, 207.

6 Stephen Ferrando, "Letter to Sisters," 24th April 1954, in *From the Heart of a Father who Loves You*, 51.

7 Cf. MSMHC, *Constitutions and regulations of Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians 2013* (Guwahati: MSMHC Publications, 2013), 44. (hereafter referred as MSMHC Constitutions and Regulations, 2013)

8 Elizabeth M. Dowling and W. George Scarlett, *Encyclopedia of Religious and Spiritual Development* (New Delhi: A Sage reference publication, 2006), 350.

person to experience God in deeper sense which helps an individual to grow in spirit and spirituality of life as he/she stands before the omnipotence and the transcendence of God. "Growing within us is the need to trust, to trust ever more in him; we understand that 'we do not know how to pray as we ought" (Rom.8:26). And it is the Holy Spirit who helps a person in his incapacity, who illuminates his mind and warms his heart, guiding him to turn to God. The Holy Spirit enables a person who prays to abandon and overcome every form of fear and slavery, living the authentic freedom of the Children of God. Without prayer as described by St. Paul states that a person can do no good but evil which he doesn't want (Rom. 7:19).

It is the experience of many that with prayer one is not liberated from trails and suffering, but they can live through them in union with Christ, with his suffering, in the hope of participating in his glory (Rom. 8:17). Many times, in prayer, people ask God to be freed from physical and spiritual evil, and they do it with great trust. However, often they have the impression of not being heard by God. Prayer is a channel of hope for all creation, the expression of that love of God that is poured into our hearts through the spirit whom he has given to us (Rom 5:5).[9]

1.1.2 Significance of Prayer in Personal Life

Growing up in prayer was only what people did before their meals or when they were faced with difficult trails. But prayer is something very sacred. The discipleship of Jesus Christ necessarily indicates the fact that a Christian should be a person of prayer.[10] Through the Gospel people learn how Jesus was a person of prayer. In fact, the disciples often found Jesus at prayer.

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9 Cf. Benedict XVI, "Prayer sets men free," *L'Osservatore Romano* (23 May 2012), 11.

10 Cf. Antonisamy, *An Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, 56.

"Now during those days, he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God" (Lk 6:12). They found in the life of Jesus a consistent pattern: withdrawal, prayer and activity. Jesus not only prayed but taught his disciples how to pray and asked them to pray always without losing heart.[11] Therefore, people pray before meals and other moments of trails and difficulties with much devotion and love to obtain graces and favors. To grow in relationship with God people began to learn about the real signification of prayer. They learned that prayer is not a ritual, and is instead, a way of communication, a way of expressing ourselves to our creator, and a way of deepening our relationship with Him. God wants to have a relationship with us, and in maintaining relationships, communication is extremely important. It is true that He knows what our hearts and minds is (Lk 16:15, Ps 139:2), but He wants us to tell them to Him. God tells us to call upon Him (Lk 18:1-8), He wants us to ask Him questions, He wants us to seek Him with all our hearts, and He wants us to knock so that doors can be opened for us (Mt 7:7-8). By doing these things we get the best gift of all, which is to know God personally and to have a relationship with Him.

Through prayer, God grows us in our understanding of Him. He shows us how deeply He cares for us and helps us to understand how powerful He truly is. Christians, tend to downplay prayer, often seeing it as the last thing to do rather than the first. To encourage one another, we tell each other, "Just pray about it." We gravely undervalue prayer, its significance, and its power, and, in so doing, we are robbed of the joy that God intended for us to experience through prayer. It is through prayer that we talk to God, and because we love talking to Him and we love growing in

[11] Cf. Antonisamy, *An Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, 56.

our relationship with Him. Moreover, through prayer we receive and hear God's call and guidance to live of conviction.[12]

1.2 Types of Prayer

Traditionally prayer is divided into vocal prayer and mental prayer. These two prayers are very essential to grow in spiritual life. Through the various forms of prayer people draw their focus on Divine. Some people grow in holiness by practicing those prayers faithfully in their lives. Therefore, we shall try to describe the importance of these two types of prayers and its effect which allows us to live in authentic freedom as the children of God.[13] St. Teresa of Avila for the clearest and best classification of the grades of prayer. Her concept that the intensity of one's life of prayer coincides with the of one's charity is based on solid theology and was confirmed by St. Pius X[14]. The grades of prayer taught by St. Teresa of Avila represent so many grades of elevation and ascent towards Christian perfection.[15] These grades are, Vocal Prayer, meditation, nature of meditation etc. Therefore, the prayer leads everyone to the mystical phase of the spiritual life.

1.2.1 Vocal Prayer

Vocal prayer uses words that are recited, spoken, or sung. It may draw on already composed material with a long history in a culture or community. It may also be spontaneous. The Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, Liturgical texts, Psalms, Litanies, and Ejaculations

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12 Cf. Esther Zonunsangi,"Formation:Shaping Life to Live Charism," *MSMHC Mission Congress*, ed. Philomena Mathew and Irene Zosiami (Guwahati: MSMHC Publications, 2020), 155-159.

13 Cf. Benedict XVI, "Prayer sets men free," *L'Osservatore Romano* (23 May 2012), 11.

14 Cf. J.de Guibert, *Documenta ecclesiastica christianae perfectionis stadium spectantia*, 7 March 1914 (Rome: Gregorianum, 1931), 636.

15 Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1980), 316.

are examples of centuries – old vocal prayers.[16] Vocal prayer is an essential element of the Christian life. The disciples of Jesus were drawn by their master's silent prayer, but Jesus taught them a vocal prayer, the "Our Father". He not only prayed aloud the liturgical prayers of the synagogue but, as the Gospel show, he raised his voice to express his personal prayer, from exultant blessing of the Father during his agony in the garden of *Gesthemani* (Mt. 11:25-26; Mk 14:36). Vocal prayers well-made enable every Christian to lead a good Christian life. Our attention, devotion and submission are required for the success of our vocal prayers.[17] Our pioneer sisters of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians were more enthused with the vocal prayers. They are the great example for the sisters of MSMHC to bring up to its sanctity. They were fully absorbed with the love of God in all that they did and glorified God who called them. They were faithful to their commitment through vocal prayers. They constantly fixed their mind on the Divine.

St. John Bosco always urged his boys to "pray well" and said, "Verbal prayer without thought is like a body without a soul."[18] In the same manner Venerable Bishop Stephen Ferrando, too often reminded his daughters to pray well and turn every work into prayer. St. Thomas Aquinas held the view that to attain the good work; it is necessary to focus our attention on God and performed the act with love. St. Ignatius of Loyola in his "Spiritual Exercises" teaches a manner of praying vocally which consists in saying some prayer very slowly, leaving the space of a full breath between each word.

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16 Cf. Richard P. Mc Brien, "Vocal Prayer," *The Harpercollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (New York: HarperCollins Publications, 1985), 1038.

17 Cf. Thomas Manjalankal, *Prayer In the footsteps of Jesus*, ed. Sabastian Kizhakkeyil (Ruhalaya: Ujjain Publications, 2003), 71.

18 David J. de Burgh, *Francis and John* (California: The Benziger Sisters Publications, 1979), 72.

1.2.2 Meditation

Meditation is an essential form of prayer that deepens our knowledge and love of God. It fosters close union with God, detaches the heart from earthly ties and fills it with apostolic zeal and nourishes our dedication to the service of others. It engages thought, imagination, emotion and desire. This mobilization of faculties is necessary in order to deepen our convictions of faith, prompt the conversion of our heart and strengthen our will to follow Christ. Meditation is thus above all a quest. Christian prayer tries above all to meditate on the mysteries of Christ, as in *Lectio divina* or the rosary. All this prayer should lead to the knowledge of the love of the Lord Jesus, to union with him.[19] Thus we can define that meditation comes from the Latin word "*meditari*" which means to concentrate on something. It is an inclusive word which stands for any person, group of persons, any incident, any object or anything under the sun."[20] Meditation is not to be an intellectual exercise to be indulged in, nor as a ritual performance to be finished soon. Rather, it is a time to keep one's body in profound rest and consciousness in full awareness. What meditation seeks to give us is precisely this: to be aware, while your whole being, including your mind, sinks into deep rest.[21]

There are three important steps in order to make a good meditation. They are: i) the right postures. ii) the right rhythm of breathing and iii) the silencing of the senses. Meditation becomes profound prayer when the awareness is directed to God. In meditation, we sit quiet and focus our whole consecration to the Divine. Reading the Word of God in advance, one ponders in the deepest self the words or a phrase or a sentence from the Bible. The very purpose

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19 *CCC*, 2708.

20 Antonisamy, *An introduction to Christian spirituality*, 76.

21 Cf. V.F. Vineeth, *Meditation* (Bangalore: Vidya Vanam Publications, 2003), 9.

of meditation is to give one a sense of being rooted, of being present to oneself, of being tranquil and at peace. Some people find it very easy to do meditation. But for people whose minds and imaginations are very active it can be rather difficult. However, these are the very people who can benefit most from it. Even if one finds it hard, distracted and lost, one may still notice that this effort to be more present to oneself in the 'here and now' has a comforting effect on him or her. Meditation well done helps an individual to be more in touch with the part of oneself that is more interior and centered.[22]

During meditation one is more aware of God's presence in one's self, in the light of God's grace, and one realizes who one is and in the light of true self- knowledge. [23] In meditation many find true God and his ways to grow in holiness of life. For sisters of MSMHCs the daily meditation enables the members to reflect on the Word of God, and it nourishes their soul to remain firm in our religious consecration. In the light of meditation every member, experience the closeness of God, it relates to their mission. True to it their mission becomes more fruitful and joyful experience to share it with their neighbor.

1.2.3 Nature of Meditation

Meditation has a double finality, one intellectual and the other affective and practical. The intellectual purpose is to arrive at firm convictions concerning some supernatural truth, hence the importance of the intellect in meditation.[24] The most important element in meditation is the act of love aroused in the will on the presentation of some supernatural truth by the intellect. As St.

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22 Cf. Donal Dorr, *Integral Spirituality* (New York: Orbis books Maryknoll, 1990), 55.

23 Cf. Antonisamy, *An introduction to Christian spirituality*, 150.

24 Cf. Rosita Joseph, *Spiritual Theology* (Class Notes, Ferrando Institute of Spirituality, Umsning, 2021), 20-21.

Teresa points out, meditation consists not so much in thinking great deal but in loving a great deal.[25] When the will bursts forth with acts of love, an intimate content is established between the soul and God.

The guiding principle for subject matter is to select what is needed at a time and will be beneficial according to one's capacities. Consequently, it is important to insist upon prudence in the selection of the material for meditation. Not all subject matters are suited for all souls, nor even for a given soul in varying circumstances. In general, young people or beginners in the practice of meditation will do well to utilize what has been called imaginative meditation (scenes from the life of Christ, Mary, and the saints), liturgical meditations, or moral meditations.[26]

Methods of Meditation

In selecting a method of meditation, two extremes should be avoided: excessive rigidity and inconstancy. At the beginning of the practice of prayer it is generally necessary to adhere to some method or other, because yet the soul does not know how to proceed in the life of prayer. In these early stages it is important that the soul should not only follow a method, but that it should also select the most beneficial method, for the needs of souls are not identical. As the soul progresses in the practice of prayer, however, and is more at ease in conversing with God, the method becomes less and less important and eventually may even become an obstacle to further progress. It should also be noted that, since we are not usually the best judge of our own needs, a prudent and wise spiritual director is of great help in leading the soul from one

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25 Cf. Ruth Burrows, *The Interior Castle*, trans. and ed. E. Allison (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1946),7.

26 Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1980), 319. (hereafter referred as Spiritual Theology)

grade of prayer to another, so long as the director is not slavishly addicted to one method exclusively.

Although ancient writers such as St. John Cassian and St. Bernard spoke about methods of prayer, it was not until the sixteenth century that spiritual writers began to offer detailed methods of discursive prayer. Since that time, methods of prayer have been compiled or adapted by such writers as Louis of Granada, St. Ignatius Loyola, St. Francis de Sales, St. Alphonsus Liguori, St. John Baptist de la Salle, and Cardinal Berulle.[27] The MSMHC Constitution (Art. 64) states that the MSMHC have a set of time for their meditation which is an essential form of prayer that deepens their knowledge and love of God through the Word of God. It fosters close union with Him, deeper interior self to search God who is invisible, in the written book of life. "It also detaches the heart from earthly connections and fills it with apostolic zeal and nourishes our dedication to the service of others. Therefore, it is vital need for all the members to follow the direction which their Founder Venerable Bishop Stephen Ferrando has mention in their constitution."[28]

Besides, daily meditation in a week as a FIS community, they have on Tuesday- Nature Meditation, Wednesday-Sheared Meditation, and on Sunday- Faith Shearing according in groups. It all helps them to grow in holiness of life. The Congregation shows great concern for all the members to grow in holiness of life. It is clearly indicated by Bishop Ferrando who exhorted the first batch of Novices on 14th August 1942 that "I remember you daily in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass that you may become holy, true children

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27 Cf. Lercaro, *Methods of Mental Prayer* Westminster, Md. Newman, 1957, 45.

28 MSMHC, *Constitutions and Regulations,* 48.

of the Blessed Virgin Mary."[29] Meditation has three parts: the exercise of the mind in the acquisition of firm convictions concerning some supernatural truth or virtue through reflection upon it; the exercise of the sentiments and heart in detesting sin, making sincere resolutions and above all-praying for continual progress. Fr. Cafasso had a simple method: "Read a little, make various pauses for reflection and affectionate colloquies. St. Nilus calls it 'our mirror to find out our vices or lack of virtues".[30]

Eucharist: The Highest Form of Prayer

The Holy Eucharist is the highest form of prayer in the Holy Catholic Church. At the Last Supper, on the night He was betrayed, Lord Jesus Instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of His Body and Blood.[31] The Eucharist is both a mystery of faith and a 'Mystery of Light'. The Eucharist draws people daily into the Mystery of love, nuptial love "the redemptive act of Christ the Bridegroom towards the Church the Bride". Therefore, it is a Mystery of profound love and joy. It is the heart of the life of every baptized person and of consecrated life itself. [32] There are many as Christians who are daily partakers of the Holy Eucharist. But the question is how do we know that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist? Some time we too may doubt the real Eucharistic Lord, who makes Himself available on the altar of love. It is the very 'WORD' "This is my body." "This is my blood," were spoken in fulfillment of a promise Jesus had made that he would give his flesh to eat and his blood to

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29 Stephen Ferrando, "Letter to Novices" 14 August 1942, in *From the Heart of a Father Who Loves You*, 10.

30 David J. Burgh, *Francis and John* (California: The Benziger Sisters Publications, 1997), 80.

31 Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, ed. Austin Flannery, *Vatican Council II* (Mumbai: St. Paul Publications, 1975), 35.

32 Cf. Francis, *Vultum Dei Quaerere*, Apostolic Constitution on Seeking the Face of God (Trivandrum: Carmel International Publications, 2016), 29.

drink.[33] At these words the actual bread and wine cease to exist. "Therefore, the man who feeds on me will have life because of me" (Jn. 6:57).

Venerable Bishop Stephen Ferrando very often uses to tell her Sisters, 'To be Eucharistic souls'[34] He was a great devotee of the Holy Eucharist. Holy Eucharist was an integral part of his life and mission. He drew great strength of the Holy Eucharist which he daily celebrated, worshipped and adored. Indeed, by the strength of the Living Bread which he shared at the Eucharistic table, he himself became the Eucharist, the bread of life, to be broken for all whom he served. He had a deep love for the Eucharist; therefore, he went through difficult situations of life. It was from the deep experience of living bread that he became a Eucharistic person and that's how he was able to exhort his spiritual daughters to be 'Eucharistic souls"[35]

Jesus Christ through this very act wanted to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross to remind the entire human race about his passion, death, and resurrection. The Holy Eucharist calls all the participants of the Holy Sacrifice to learn to offer themselves for others. Doing so they come closer and closer to become perfect union with God and each other, so that God may be all in all.[36] The Eucharist is everything, truly everything, because the Eucharist is Jesus. It is the living, acting Jesus in which the Father gives to every man of every place and time the personal gift of His Son, the gift of all He is and has done, poured into the poverty of our distressing disguise through the utter poverty of the appearance

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33 James Kilgallon, Gerard Weber, and Leonard Ziegmann, *Life in Christ* (London: Sheed and Ward Publications, 1976), 176.

34 Stephen Ferrando, "Letter to Sr. Nellie" 1 October 1965, in *From the Heart of a Father who loves you*, 104.

35 Cf. Stephen Ferrando, "Letter Sr. Nellie" 1October 1965, in *From the Heart of a Father who loves you*, 104.

36 Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 35.

of bread, satiating His Hunger in ours with the Bread of Life that transforms us into Him whom we consume and allows us to live with His Life, doing what He has done.[37]

In the Holy Eucharist we not only receive all that Jesus is and has done, we are not only touch with Him who is, in touch with His incarnation, in touch with His passion and death, in touch with His resurrection, ascension, and sending of His Spirit; we become all that Jesus is, and we begin to do what he has done. His works enter time not only in the Eucharist but through us who are nourished by that Eucharist. We become not only daily witnesses of the Pascal Mystery, we ourselves enter that mystery, we enter into Jesus' Eucharist, we become as it were a living extension of his Eucharist and his Mysteries. By means of the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist we have his continual and abiding presence among us. Jesus once told the apostles, "I will not leave you orphans. "True to his promise, he has indeed remained among us, actually and physically present in the Holy Eucharist.[38] According to St. Paul, "the Eucharist is above all the "Supper of the Lord"(1Cor. 11:20), a meal at which the community of believers eats its spiritual food and drink its spiritual drink"[39] (1Cor.10:3-4). The Church, as a community together by the Holy Spirit, as the new temple of God (1Cor.3:16-17), to offer spiritual sacrifice (1Pet.2:4-5), blesses God by uniting itself to the praise of Jesus Christ. This sacrifice of praise offered to God by the Church becomes one and the same sacrifice of Christ, once and for all offered to god (Heb.10:10) in the name of all humanity and now

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37 Cf. Teresa of Calcutta, "Women religious and Mission". *Omnis Terra*, N.264, (1996), 34-35.

38 James Kilgallon, Gerard Weber, and Leonard Ziegmann, *Life in Christ* (London: Sheed and Ward Publications, 1976), 179.

39 Sebastian Athappilly and Paulachan Kochappilly, ed. *The mystery of the Eucharist* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2006), 44. (hereafter referred as the Mystery of the Eucharist)

continued in heaven (Heb.(9:24), Christ being exalted and seated at the right hand of God (Phil.2:11). This worship of the church will have its fulfillment in heaven (Rev. 2.11). As a reflection of the eschatological fulfillment, the Church now celebrates the Eucharist which signs the glory of the Lord and the merciful deeds of God in Christ.[40]

Many of the pioneer sisters of Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians had great devotion to the Eucharist Lord. Through the spiritual communion they united themselves always in the presence of living God. The very Encyclical Letter '*Ecclesia de Eucharistia'* states about this practice "Precisely for this reason it is good to cultivate in our hearts a constant desire for the sacrament of the Eucharist. This was the origin of the practice of "spiritual communion", which has happily been established in the Church. It was also recommended by saints who were masters of the spiritual life. Saint Teresa of Child Jesus wrote: "When you do not receive communion and you do not attend Mass, beneficial practice; by it the love of God will be greatly impressed on you".[41] So the Holy Eucharist is known as "spiritual offering" to the glory of God.[42] It is a daily spiritual offering that we make, for the glory of God.

The Eucharist is not only the inner principle and motivation for mission; it is also the plan and programme of mission. The experience of the Eucharist presence is transformed into concrete actions in the world. First, it is expressed in "thanksgiving" to the Creator. In the context of growing worldliness and godliness the

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40 Cf. Sebastian Athappilly and Paulachan Kochappilly, *The mystery of the Eucharist*, 68.

41 John Paul II, *Ecclesia De Eucharistia,* Encyclical Letter of His Holiness (Mumbai: St. Paul Publications, 2003), 41. (Here after referred *Ecclesia De Eucharistia*).

42 Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments* (Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2002), 147.

world needs a greater openness to God in all fields of life. Human reality cannot be justified without reference to the Creator. An "Eucharistic attitude", which is at the basis of human autonomy. Secondly, the Eucharist leads to a project of "solidarity" for all humanity. It is not only instrumental for the unity within the Church, but also for the unity of the whole human race. In today's world of war, terror and calamities the Eucharist teaches us the ways to peace, dialogue and communion. Thirdly, the Eucharist projects a plan for "service" to the least, so that we can build up a more just and fraternal society. In the Eucharist we find an extreme expression of love, "overturning all those criteria of power, which too often govern human relations and radically affirming the criterion of service: 'if anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all' (Mk 9:35).[43]

need to get caught up in details, for there we might also encounter mistakes and failures. Not everything a saint says is completely faithful to the Gospel; not everything he or she does is authentic or perfect. What we need to contemplate is the totality of their life, their entire journey of growth in holiness, the refection of Jesus Christ that emerges when we grasp their overall meaning as a person.[44] Fathers of the Church, they were faithful to the command of God. Many of them pass through quite difficult times and some reformed the church with false practices and brought new changes in the Church. Therefore, here we have few of them to look up as our model of faith.

Conclusion

Prayer is very essential for the spiritual growth of an individual. To grow in spiritual life, it requires the total trust in the Divine

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43 Sebastian Athappilly and Paulachan Kochappilly, *The mystery of the Eucharist*, 199.

44 Cf. Francis, *Gaudete Et Exsultate*, Apostolic Exhortation on the call to holiness in Today World (Mumbai: St. Paul's Publications, 2018), 21.

Master and seeking His graces, by submitting one's own will to God. We see that the prayer leads people to be the person of Christ. Hence, Christ's love and his Compassion draws them experience His love in all that they do. Therefore, it is an individual's effort to grow in holiness of life and seek his face by doing extraordinary deeds of love. In the Church we have many great saints and Founder, pioneers as well as the great missionaries who stand before us an example to imitate. They were the person of God centeredness, which helped them to be faithful even in the smallest things. They were faithful to their rules and regulations and carried out their given responsibilities with love. To grow in love of God, every member of the Church needs to perform the works of Christ. Hence, it is our personal desire, personal confidence on the Divine to have constant search in our interior being. In the deep silence, with much reflection with the Word of God, In the Holy Eucharistic, Marian Devotional practices, by saying the ejaculating prayers, novenas, triduum, etc are the means to grow in Holiness of life.



"Go to the whole world, Proclaim the Good News" Mk.16: 15

"All for the Glory of God and good of souls" Bp S. Ferrando

Called to be a missionary in a far away country of African Continent- Eswatini (Swaziland), I find worth in the mandate of Jesus, "Go to the whole world, proclaim the Good News"

From the time I had been the part of the MSMHC family, it was my heartfelt desire to share the Good News of Christ to my brothers and sisters where Christ sends me. Thanks be to God! My cherished dream was fulfilled when I got the first-hand experience of the missionary Evangelization - touring in the villages of Moranhat as a 2nd year novice during my practical with late Sr. Sebastiani Kujur, and in the hills of Arunachal Pradesh soon after my First Profession in 1992 with Sr. Gemma Sebastian a great missionary. It was a wonderful mission experience. Walking tirelessly long distance, climbing high mountains, going down the deep valleys- falling down few times in between and rising again to continue the missionary journey, were exciting and memorable experiences for me a young missionary at that time. I was also very happy to visit the villages under Tinsukia Parish with late Sr. Rosemary K. as a young sister soon after my juniorate. We would visit the villages and families, conducting Sunday service when

the priests were not available for Sunday Mass due to the lack of priests and vast area of mission. It gave me great joy to be with people in the villages. I was also blessed to tour some of the villages in Dibrugarh parish, in Nagaland and Manipur where I got rich experiences in the mission field. I am very grateful to my touring companion sisters, fathers, catechists, youth and the people who have touched my lives and gave me beautiful God experience. May the beautiful souls of Sr. Sebastiani Kujur and Sr. Rosemary K. rest in peace. I wished to continue these types of missionary work but with the passing of years I was engaged most of the time in the field of education.

But God was so good and kind to me and I praise and thank Him for giving me another chance to be a missionary in Swaziland sent by Sr. Mary Thadavanal, the then Superior General and her councillors on 29th January 2006 and to be engaged in the pastoral work here in Swaziland. Here too I am in the pre- School but I have the opportunity to do the pastoral work, besides the teaching ministry.

My missionary life in the Kingdom of Eswatini in St. John Bosco parish Malkerns has varied rich experiences, with its ups and downs, sunshine and shade which makes the missionary life interesting and challenging at times. The Covid 19 lock down has made our planned regular program to its standstill but when there is a need we do visit families with great care and precaution. During this Covid 19 pandemic lock down, we visited the sick and bereaved families of our parish in different villages.

I am very happy that my faith too has increased as I share the good news of Jesus through the given responsibilities in the community as well as in the parish. The community has given me the responsibility to take care of our Missionary Evangelization. The pastoral works that I am involved in are:

1. Family apostolate, Catechists' coordinator, SCC, organizing Intensive catechism classes in the villages during school term holidays, which we carry out on regular basis in a well- planned and systematic way.

Family Visits

I found great joy in visiting the families talking and listening to the people who are very sociable and simple, approachable and very receptive to the Word of God and they appreciate our visit and the prayers which we offered them. They are hungry for the Word of God and prayers. It is a great joy to be with them.

Catechists' meetings & Commissioning of the Catechists

Working with the catechists gave me more experience as we discussed, planned and evaluated the pastoral work of our parish. I appreciate the hard work and commitment of the catechists who tried their best to pass on the faith to their children, youth and adult. Sometimes we as catechists faced many challenges in our responsibilities due to the lack of personnel as some of them retired, some got sick and some stopped due to the challenges which they came across in their personal life / family. But the work of catechesis goes on with the commitment and selfless sacrifice of the catechists. May God bless and reward them hundredfold.

SCC/FCC, St. Anne's Sodality

I also found a great satisfaction and joy in sharing the Word of God and gospel reflection during the SCC along with the community members (Small Christian Community), FCC (Family & Community Catechesis)- on the 4th Sunday of the month and every month and going for a meeting with St. Anne's Sodality every 2nd Sunday of the months- listening to their sharing on the good work they do for the people in the parish and their visit to the old and sick, helping the needy etc. I am happy to give them the

Gospel message/talk on any relevant topic. This has also helped me to grow in my faith. Thank you Jesus.

Intensive Catechism Class

The other thing which gives me more joy is to go to the villages during School Term holidays and teach catechism class to the children, youth and adults. People are there ready to receive us with hungry hearts and joyful spirit to listen to the Word of God and whatever lessons we teach them about our Catholic faith. We the MSMHC have covered different topics during our catechism class in the villages. It is worth mentioning that our catechists were and are great help in our mission. We always involve them whenever we conduct Intensive catechism class in the villages or in the parish. They help us with the translation as well as they are happy to share the topics. We also involved our Pre- School teachers when necessity arose and they did it with great joy and love. Thanks to all of them. May God reward them abundantly.

It is noteworthy to mention that some villages even prepare something for us to eat when we spend the whole day for a week in teaching and catechizing them. They greatly appreciate our time with them and their response is very positive.

Communion to the Sick

I am extremely happy and thankful to God for the great privilege he has given us the MSMHC in Swaziland to carry Holy Communion to the sick who are unable to come to church and thanks to the fathers for giving us this opportunity to share in their mission when they are unable to reach them out. We are ever ready to assist them joyfully. I found special joy to carry Jesus to the sick when the opportunity arose. The sick and the poor appreciated our humble service and offered the little offerings which they had. They give us vegetables, fruits, maize,

groundnuts, pumpkins, butternuts etc. May God bless their love and generosity.

Accompanying the priest for House blessing in the village

Another joyful experience which I had was- accompanying the priest for the house blessing in the village of Ntondozi this year. The people of the village were overjoyed to be visited by the priest and an MSMHC. It was for the first time that their homes were blessed during Easter Season. Thanks to Fr. Odise Lazri SDB the Assistant Parish priest of Malkerns who took the initiative. To show their joy and gratitude the people offered, fruits, vegetables, sweet potatoes etc. from their gardens and orchards. May the good Lord bless their generosity.

Focus Village- Ekufinyeni (2000 village)

It was a joyful experience for me as the MSMHC at Malkerns adopted Ekufinyeni (2000 village) as our 'Focus Village' as per the decision of IX General Chapter. Sr. Elsa Joseph and I went to Ekufinyeni village for the first time to conduct some program on 11th August 2018. Sr. Mary Clara Topno was in India for her jubilee celebration. We gathered the people and Sr. Elsa Joseph explained to them the purpose of our visit to their village:

- To find out what are their challenges
- To adopt their village as focus village
- To organize some health program for them
- HIV testing and treatment

The people in response to our enquiry expressed that they need borehole to be able to get water for their cultivation. Road and bridge to the area where it is difficult to go. Manure/ money to buy manure as most of them are farmers.

We also identified few children from poor families who don't go to any school; we then informed the people to tell the parents of

these children to come and meet the sisters in the convent to discuss about these issues as the parents were not present.

Sr. Elsa Joseph gave them the Gospel message on salt and yeast and on mustard seed encouraging the people young and old to be like salt and yeast bringing taste and happiness in others' lives. She also gave health talk and explained about hope house in short and encouraged them to take sick person if any, to Hope House for palliative care. After her talk, I spoke to them about St. Clare on the feast of St. Clare as well as about Sr. Susanna in short today being her feast day and the feast of St. Clare, St. Philomena, Mother Philo's feast day and the feast of Srs. Susan and Clara. At the end of the program, we gave for everyone biscuits and chips which we had carried for them.

Since then, we continue to visit our 'Focus village ', conducting various programs and visiting the families. We also helped the needy students from the poor families especially with Pre-school education. We assisted them during the COVID 19 pandemic, provided food hampers for 50 families.

Sr. Clara and I visited them once again at beginning of the year 2022 (5th January) to give out 'New Year Food hampers. This time we gathered only few people due to the COVID 19 Pandemic, one from each family. Both of us gave the New Year message speaking about God's love for us and our love for God and for one another. After her message, Sr. Mary Clara Topno spoke to the people about God's love which comes to us through persons.

As we helped them with water project, Sr. Mary Clara Topno encouraged the people to work together in unity; everyone should contribute what each family is expected to do. She also advised them to keep the surrounding clean in order to live a healthy life. We then went to see the concrete which they were making for

water tank and found that the work is in progress. The village headman-Mr.Nsimbi Lukhele said a vote of thanks to the sisters on behalf of the people, thanking us the MSMHC especially Sr. Elsa P. Joseph for the support which our community has shown them by helping them always, more especially with the water project which is greatly appreciated. This was their urgent and dire need. The water project was our community gift to the people of our Focus village as we complete our 20 years of service in Eswatini.Mrs.Tryphina Mathola too explained the plight of the people in their village since 1999 when they were evacuated and sent to Ekufinyeni/ 2000 village and since then they had been struggling as they had no facilities for water. They had to walk far distance to get water. But now the sisters have come to rescue them as they had also helped them in the past.

2. **Education:** In charge of St. John Bosco Pre - School. In the school, grabbing the opportunity, I try to bring the Good News of Christ in the form of daily gospel reading & messages during the school assembly, teaching the students Bible Verses, some short devotional hymns along with Nursery Rhymes, Bible stories, teaching the basics of our Catholic faith, quotes from our Founder Venerable Stephen Ferrando, about the MSMHC etc. In this way, I try to inculcate the gospel values to the little minds as well as to the teachers and parents during the meetings, sharing the Word of God and reflection. Thanks be to God, Eswatini (Swaziland) being a Christian country it is easy for us missionaries to preach Christ. Praise the Lord! May God grant me the grace to live the values of Jesus Christ.

Mission experience during Covid 19 Pandemic:

My experience of missionary apostolate during the Covid 19 Pandemic is very unique and lasting. The people began to knock at our door asking for food as many of them do not work and are struggling in their lives. So we decided to do something for our

people who are hungry, sick and suffering. Sr. Elsa P. Joseph requested some friends to assist us in our relief program. God our Loving Father doesn't abandon the poor. He gave us good and generous friends who gave us monetary Fund and some of them donated vegetables, loaves of bread etc. We were able to reach out to 45 villages and around 1200 families during the four big distributions of food hampers. We thank our Good Lord for giving us this opportunity to help our suffering people during this time of the Covid 19 Pandemic. We continue to experience His choicest blessings in our daily lives as we get more generous friends to assist us in reaching out to more people who are in great need due to the present pandemic. We are very happy that God gives us strength and good health to work tirelessly with joy and contentment for our people of the Kingdom of ESwatini. May His name be praised in all that we do with His help and grace. We strongly believe that Our Blessed Mother Mary Immaculate, the Help of Christians is interceding for us along with our Father and Founder Venerable Bishop Stephen Ferrando SDB.

125th Birth anniversary of our Founder Venerable Bishop Stephen Ferrando SDB

To mark the 125th Birth anniversary of our Founder, we the MSMHC at Malkerns joined the entire congregation preparing spiritually through nine days novena prayer. We then distributed food hampers to 200 poor families of 6 villages catholic as well as non-Catholic. I prepared the talk on Bishop Stephen Ferrando in the local language - Siswati and gave to all the leaders of these five villages and requested them to speak to the people about the life of Venerable Bishop Stephen Ferrando as we were not able to go to them due to the COVID 19 Pandemic. The leaders happily promised to spread this message about the life of Bishop Stephen Ferrando. The great and happy day dawned for us as our important plan was fulfilled on 24th September, the special day of our Blessed

Mother. Sr. Mary Clara Topno and me distributed the food hampers to the poor families of Malkerns. Sr. Mary Clara Topno the animator of our community opened the day with a prayer. Then she welcomed everyone and gave a short talk on Bishop Stephen Ferrando. After her introduction, I too spoke about Venerable Bishop Stephen Ferrando in detail in Siswati language. People were very happy to hear about him in their local language.

We then with the help of Pre-school teachers and volunteers gave out the food stuff. The people were very grateful to God, to the sisters as well as to the donors. After receiving their food stuff, they went their homes happily.

We also conducted Festive oratory on 25th September for the children of Malkerns. More than 150 children came to participate. Sr. Mary Clara Topno who is in charge of the oratory prepared the things and kept ready with the help of Mr. Lucky and some bigger oratory children. I joined later on. Since the infection is still high, we couldn't organize games/ competition. We only gave the message about Venerable Bishop Stephen Ferrando. The police officers came to assist us as there were many children and they needed to keep the social distancing.

Registration of St. John Bosco Pre- school: Another God experience which I had in 16 years of my missionary life in Swaziland, the great miracle which we received from the Lord is the Registration of our Pre school in the Ministry of Education. We had applied for the registration in 2010 and paid E 5000.00. It took long years to be registered as the Govt was slow to act. With the encouragement and support of the community(Srs. Elsa P. Joseph and Mary Clara Topno) and one of our friends Patricia Johnston (Aunty Pa), I visited the REO (Regional Education Officer) in Manzini on 21st December 2017 accompanied by Sr. Francisa Mkhaliphi (A Servite sister from Manzini). Unfortunately REO -Mr. Mamba wasn't there on that particular day and the

deputy REO Mr. Nhlanhla Dlamini attended us. At his advice I submitted the Project Proposal of St. John Bosco Pre- school with all its requirements. The Education Advisory Board took almost a year to visit our school for the inspection. As informed by the REO, Mr. Mamba and other officers came to inspect St. John Bosco Pre- School on 17the October 2018: at 11 a.m. I, welcomed them in the office. They then made a tour of the school premises- going to different classes. They were happy and impressed with the school set up.

They also suggested me to write the new proposal and submit it in the office by Friday (19th October). Following documents should be attached witht the prosposal:

1. Title Deed of the School(unavailable)
2. Teachers' qualification certificates(certified)
3. Teachers' ID copies (certified)
4. Bank Statement (N/A)
5. History of the school

After visiting the Regional office Manzini several times from the beginning of the year 2019 following up the registration work, requesting the REO to do the needful as it was an urgent need to be registered. At last St. John Bosco Pre- School was registered and recognized on 4th Dec 2019 in the Ministry of Education by the Acting REO- Mr. Nhlanhla Dlamini who handed over the license to me personally. This was one of my greatest achievements in the field of teaching ministry and I thank the Almighty God for the great blessings brought to our Pre- School after long 9 years of waiting in hope. Special thanks to the community and those who assisted me in this struggle.

I take this golden opportunity to thank my community members and pioneers Srs. Elsa P. Joseph, Marrietta Joseph, Mary Clara Topno and Bina Basumatary who have toiled hard for the growth

of our Swaziland Mission. Having lived with them for many years, I have learnt many good things and have gained rich experience in the pastoral work of the parish.

I am very grateful to God, to Our Blessed Mother Mary and our Founder Venerable Bishop Stephen Ferrando for being with me in my life's journey in this far away mission and for their powerful intercession. I too express my sincere gratitude to our Mother General Sr. Philomena Mathew and the General Councillors who gave me the opportunity to venture into this mission land in the Kingdom of Eswatini to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ as well as for the love, encouragement and prayerful support which you and our MSMHC family give us always. Though we are not the full-time touring sisters, I am very happy to share about my Mission experience in Swaziland.

I owe my special thanks to my aging beloved mom Mrs. Dominica Hansdak who is my inspiration and role model in my Christian life, who has taught me from my early childhood to love and serve God and to face the challenges of life with courage. My Dad's inspiring and encouraging words will always remain fresh in my memory, **"You have left the world, think of God, his people and your soul."** The good advices of my beloved parents, their holy and exemplary life are my guiding principles in my life. I am also very grateful to God for the missionary call given to my younger sister -Sr. Sanju Shalini Soren MSMHC a missionary in Assam. May our beloved dad -late Mr. Dominic Soren intercede for us from heaven to persevere in our call. Thanks to my brothers and sisters for their love and prayerful support and all those who came in my life's journey.

Challenges:

* The big challenge before me is- not being able to master the local language (SiSwati). I can manage somehow but I'm not

able to preach fluently. We take advantage because we can manage our work as most of them know English with the exception of old people in the villages. This is my big drawback- after living in Swaziland for 16 long years I have not mastered the language.

* Another challenge which we face is the culture of our Swazi people. They are so bound to their culture that sometimes we find difficult to teach our Catholic faith. The experience teaches us that their culture is more important for them than the religion. We continue to hope and pray that one day God will help them to come out of their social problems.

* At present one of the challenges are the consequences of COVID 19 Pandemic. Some people have become cold and indifferent in going to church and practising the Catholic faith. They feel still insecure and unsafe to go back to church. We continue to pray for them, hoping that one day God will bring them back to His True fold under one Shepherd.

We also lost few very committed and good catechists in the past two years as they answered the Lord's call to eternity and their death has affected our catechism classes much. We try to recruit more catechists to continue the noble mission of passing on the faith to the faithful.

Sr. Susan S. Soren MSMHC

I cannot do all the good that the world needs. But the world needs all the good that I can do. So do good and good will come to you.

(Jana Stanfield)