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Authors are responsible for the views expressed
in the articles of this journal.

Editorial

SIN OF RACISM

Even a prisoner has the inherent and inviolable right to his life and to his human dignity. Therefore Political leaders, who ‘preach’ about human rights to other countries, must practice what they ‘preach’ in their own countries.

On May 25, 2020, a white Police officer knelt on the neck of George Floyd, a 46 year old African American, who was handcuffed and lying face down on a city street, for nearly nine agonizing minutes while he, George Floyd, was pleading for his life and repeatedly saying, “I can’t breathe”. Such an inhuman action and brutality of the white Police officer led to the death of George Floyd and provoked protests not only in America but in many countries across the world.

The killing of another African American, Rayshard Brooks on June 12, 2020 by a white Police officer sparked fresh protests against Police brutality and added fuel to nationwide anger over racial injustice.

Addressing the American faithful on June 3, 2020, Pope Francis said, “My friends, we cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life. At the same time, we have to recognize that violence of recent nights is self-destructive and self-defeating. Nothing is gained by violence and so much is lost.”

Former American President Barack Obama said, “But we have to remember for millions of Americans, being treated differently on account of race is tragically, painfully, maddeningly ‘normal’ — whether it’s while dealing with the health care system, or interacting with the criminal justice system, or jogging down the street, or watching birds in a park.”

The World Council of Churches (WCC) condemned the violence, racism and police brutality and made an appeal for justice to be done. In our Christian witness in the world, we reject the brutality of violence and racial injustice.

Anthea Butler, Associate Professor of Religious Studies of a University of Pennsylvania, USA, has said Vatican is telling the Catholics ‘to pay attention to the racism that is happening and the racism that is in your own Church in America’.

RACISM AND CASTEISM IN THE CHURCH IN SRI LANKA

In our own country, Sri Lanka, aren't the vices –racism and casteism- present in our Catholic Church? Aren't some of our Catholics in some of our parishes / dioceses obsessed with their church-buildings rather than the Church as a Christian community composed of persons belonging to different races and castes and speaking different languages? Aren't racism and casteism present in some of our Religious Congregations? Don't some of

us consider rituals as ends in themselves at the risk of losing the gaze on God since rituals are meant to be expressions of salvation from God who is the Creator and maternal Father of all the human persons?

The gaze on God continues to get obliterated by these social evils that menace even the Church in Sri Lanka. How sad, those 500 years of Christianity in our land is still infested with this miserable black mark. It is a living scandal to the non-Christians and a great obstacle to evangelization. What about our own fault as Oblates of Jaffna and Colombo who have miserably failed in this crucial challenge though the Oblates have been in Sri Lanka for the last 170 years!!

Our Founder, St. Eugene de Mazenod wanted the Oblates to be innovators and not mere improvisers when they, as evangelisers, are faced with new needs. When he started sending the Oblate missionaries to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), he told them: *“What I want are new Christians made in a new mould. A new generation must be formed.”* Therefore the Oblates also need to become desired change agents building also equality and inclusion within the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka.

Spirit of Inclusivity and Equality needed

The Good News which God in Jesus was proclaiming was bad news for the powers that be. It was however welcome News for the victims of social injustice and all disadvantaged and peripheral people. So the Reign (Rule) of God is

revolutionary. It is provocative, boundary breaking and frontier crossing. It is available to everyone without distinction and discrimination. The God whom Jesus called Abba is the parent (Father / Mother) of all the people in the world. In the prayer Jesus taught the disciples, he wanted them to address God as the parent of all peoples. It is an inclusive prayer. Everyone everywhere belongs to God's Kingdom (reign).

Through Jesus' interpretation of the law in terms of compassion and mercy (the Sabbath controversies), risking condemnation under the law by his direct association with the peripheral people (the outcasts, sinners, lepers, women, the gentiles), Jesus showed that the coming of God's reign was the transforming rule (will) of the gracious, compassionate and forgiving God. Jesus' inclusivity, his associating with people of Jewish society considered outside the law and therefore excluded from participating in religion and social relationship of Israel, was a challenge to the dominant class – the priests and the Pharisees.

Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, challenged the exclusivism of the Jews, his own people. His inclusivity became the reason for the hostility against him and led to his execution. Jesus was crucified for standing up for the dignity of every man and every woman, and for his stand on equality, unity and solidarity of all peoples. Jesus, filled with the Spirit, was sent by Abba (God) to "bring together the scattered children of God" (Jn 11.52). Jesus died so that all may experience

inclusion and equality as a community.

The Abba of Jesus is also Abba of all the people in Sri Lanka. And Abba's tenderness and compassion embraces all. It is therefore inclusive and no one is excluded. As missionary disciples of Jesus, we are called to proclaim the rule of God's unconditional love for all races and castes in Sri Lanka through word and deed. We run the risk of being excluded as missionary disciples of Jesus if we fail to defend, as Jesus of Nazareth had done by word and deed, everyone's intrinsic inviolable dignity as a human person and also treat as equals those who are excluded (due to race, caste, language etc).

As Christians, let us dedicate ourselves to build inclusion, equality and solidarity within Sri Lanka, imitating Jesus who was noted for loving and compassionate inclusive relationships. Let us commit ourselves to make the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka become a sign of communion with God and an instrument for the promotion of unity and solidarity among our people. If, however, some groups / categories of Catholics do not feel that the Catholic Church stands in solidarity with them, they may drift elsewhere. Jesus, Prophet and Saviour, will help us to revive our benumbed commitment.

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**Prophets without enemies are no prophets.
Their vocation is first a charism, not an office.**

A distinguished eco-theologian argues the real lesson of Covid-19 is that unchecked human exploitation of the natural world and the rise of the pandemic are inextricably linked / By SEAN MCDONAGH

CAN WE HEAL OUR COMMON HOME?

IN JUST SIX months, a contagious novel virus that was first identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 has spread across the world, with more than 8.5 million confirmed cases in 188 countries. More than 472,000 people have lost their lives due to Covid-19, the respiratory infection caused by the virus, many of them dying alone without the comfort of family or friends.

The World Health Organisation warns that the pandemic is a long way from being over, and says we should be prepared for new outbreaks, especially in areas where lockdowns are eased. The last time anything similar happened was the “Spanish flu”, which, after the First World War, killed an estimated 50 million people worldwide.

History teaches us that pandemics change the world. Although the death tolls were much higher, the plague of Justinian in the sixth century severely undermined the Byzantine Empire, and the Black Death, 800 years later, which wiped out one third of the population of Europe, had a profound impact on the economy and society.

Covid-19, too, will have a dramatic impact. It is already causing the most brutal recession in living memory. In January, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projected a

global growth rate of 3.3 per cent in 2020. By mid- April 2020, with one quarter of the world's population in lockdown, the managing director of the IMF, Kristalina Georgieva, was predicting that "global growth will turn sharply negative in 2020".

"We anticipate the worst economic fallout since the Great Depression," said Ms Georgieva. Last week the IMF's chief economist, Gita Gopinath, said that she expected the forthcoming "World Economic Outlook Update" to show even worse negative growth rates. "This crisis will have devastating consequences for the world's poor," she concluded.

COVID-19 SPREAD from China to Korea, Italy, Spain, Britain, Ireland and the United States. In all of these countries, it is possible to maintain social distance and to wash one's hands regularly. It's not possible for the T'boli people of south-east Mindanao in the Philippines, whose lives I shared as a Columban missionary during the 1980s. How can you stay two metres apart and regularly wash your hands with soap and water when you share a two-room house without running water with ten other people? This is not just a problem for the T'boli, but for the one quarter of the world's population who do not have access to running water and adequate sanitation.

While some countries are starting to see confirmed cases and deaths fall following strict lockdown restrictions, others are seeing figures rise. There was a sharp increase in cases in Latin America in the second half of May; there have also been new spikes in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. According to the United Nations' estimates, more than half a billion

children worldwide are no longer able to attend school as a result of coronavirus lockdowns. Many won't return to classrooms after the pandemic, with girls more likely than boys to drop out.

The lockdowns have caused economies to contract substantially. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that some 1.6 billion people employed in the informal economy – nearly half the global workforce – could see their livelihoods destroyed, and that more than one in six working people aged up to 24 have lost their jobs since the start of the outbreak. The ILO says the pandemic risks creating a “lockdown generation” of young people forced to play catch-up on the labour market for at least ten years. The rising number of cases and associated economic challenges have also raised concerns of a food crisis in Africa.

For the first time this century, global poverty is rising and three decades of improving living standards are now in reverse. Many rich countries are providing massive financial support for businesses and workers who have been furloughed or who have lost their jobs.

Poor countries cannot do this. The International Monetary Fund estimated the overall financial needs of emerging markets at \$2.5 trillion; some of the money could be used to cancel the staggering \$1tn debt which poor and developing countries are due to pay in 2020 to richer countries and institutions. So far, there is little sign that rich countries, which are borrowing phenomenal amounts of money for their own domestic needs, will respond to the plight of poor people globally.

People are shocked and traumatised by the pain and death of

loved ones and the economic chaos that Covid-19 is causing. But the connection between the destruction of the natural world – which, in little more than two decades, has given us Covid-19, SARS, MERS, Ebola, HIV, Zika, and H1N1 – and the pandemic, is often neglected. Large-scale deforestation, habitat degradation, intensive agriculture, illegal wildlife trade and climate change have all contributed to biodiversity loss and will make the rise of new pandemics more likely.

FOR A LONG time, we have known that viruses and pathogens have leapt from other species to the human population. The destruction of biodiversity means that this happens more frequently now than in the past; worse still, unless we address the loss of biodiversity, pandemics will happen at an even greater rate in the future. We comfort ourselves with the thought that we are better placed to survive pandemics than previous generations were, as we expect our scientists to come up with cures or vaccines to protect us. At the moment, the human population stands at 7.8 billion but it is expected to increase to 10 billion within the next 30 years. Given that humans are colonising every ecosystem, we can expect more and, often, more deadly, pandemics in the future.

Many people believe that the coronavirus first jumped across to humans who were working at a “wet” market in Wuhan in China in December 2019. In these markets, animals that would seldom encounter one another in the wild such as civets, live wolf pups and pangolins are crammed together into small cages, often in filthy conditions. This is an ideal environment in which to incubate diseases that will spill over into the human population. The Chinese government has issued a temporary ban on farming, selling and eating wild animals, and Elizabeth Maruma Mrema – the United Nations

biodiversity chief – has urged all countries to ban “wet” markets.

VIVECA MORRIS, the executive director of the Law, Ethics and Animal Program at Yale Law School, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, pointed out that the Chinese are not the only ones involved in trading wild animals: “Every year, Americans pay to capture, box up, and import hundreds of millions of live animals for agriculture, the pet and aquarium industries, and other uses.” Morris asks us to look at what we are doing in our modern, industrial farms. In many places, we crowd cattle, pigs, chickens, turkeys and other animals into cramped living spaces. These can become a breeding ground for viral and bacterial pathogens, so to ensure this does not happen, we lace their feed with antibiotics. This, of course, creates the perfect conditions for antibiotic-resistant pathogens to develop and thrive. We pay the price in the form of infections by drug-resistant “super bugs” such as MRSA.

In discussing Covid-19 with Austen Ivereigh in his recent interview for *The Tablet*, Pope Francis called to mind the Spanish phrase, “God always forgives, we forgive but, sometimes, nature never forgives.” In his address in St Peter’s Square last Sunday, Francis said the pandemic was making many people reflect on their relationship with the environment. “The lockdown has reduced pollution and revealed once more the beauty of so many places free from traffic and noise,” he said. “Now, with the resumption of activities, we should all be more responsible for looking after our common home.”

A FEW DAYS earlier, a document produced by a unique collaboration including Vatican dicasteries, bishops’

conferences and Caritas was released. It highlighted and amplified the prophetic message of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*. Everything is connected, there are no separate crises: the "common home" humankind shares with the whole of creation faces a single and complex socio-environmental crisis, and requires a true ecological conversion.

The ways humans destroy much of the natural world and engage in factory farming is based on the fallacy that what we do to the natural world will not have a negative impact on human health and well-being. The Covid- 19 pandemic shows that this is untrue. Either we drastically change our ways of relating to the natural world, or we must get ready for the next pandemic. A time to heal? The choice is in our hands.

Seán McDonagh is a Columban priest who works to raise awareness of the connections between justice and peace issues, environmental sustainability, and theology. His many books include *To Care for the Earth*.

Courtesy: *Tablet*, 27 June 2020

“Rivers do not drink their own water; trees do not eat their own fruit; the sun does not shine on itself and flowers do not spread their fragrance for themselves. Living for others is a rule of nature. We are all born to help each other. No matter how difficult it is... Life is good when you are happy; but much better when others are happy because of you.”

-Pope Francis

COVID 19 and INSIGHTS INTO PERSONAL SPIRITUALITY

We find ourselves in a less hospitable world due to the global outbreak of Covid 19 pandemic. We would like to go back to the life we have been leading in the first two months of this year (2020) and yet we know that it is not possible because our lives have changed. We are a little bit chastened after this experience and now we are invited to shift and embrace the Covid 19 taskforce enacted so called the ‘new normal’ and resume our lives accordingly.

Reflecting back on the days of the global lockdown and or enacted quarantine related emergency curfew we remember how we were warned by medical experts to stay at home to avoid/eradicate the risk of spreading the virus. Even though lockdown/quarantine related emergency curfew measures are relaxed we still have to stick to precautionary measures. During lockdown/ quarantine related emergency curfew we came to a realization that home is the safest place to live in. We are learning, step by step, the truth of the old axiom more than ever. ‘East or west home is best’. For a good number of weeks, we were confined ourselves to our homes and maintained social and physical distancing from the larger community. In retrospect a great deal of good things happened during that period. One thing was that we found plenty of time for family prayer. Moreover, with a short notice we were told that the churches would be closed and all the

religious gatherings would be banned. As a result we had to deviate ourselves totally from our local faith community and spend time in family prayer at home. When the official Church went virtual and we got used to watching Mass on television and with the passage of time we rediscovered that family prayer is sine qua non of being a Christian. We learned how Fr. Patrick Peyton's prophetic statement 'family that prays together, stays together' became real in our lives. In the height of the pandemic, we accelerated our prayers and longed to gather at our family altars i.e. statue stands. Sooner it dawned on us that home is only the safest place for prayer. This brought to light the teachings of the Vatican II which said that the family is the 'Domestic Church' and we are its members.

During Lockdown/quarantine related emergency curfew we noticed that our lifestyles were gradually changing. For instance we had more time to do gardening, cooking, studying and relaxing. The environment was not exploited and as a result flora and fauna thrived well. In the middle of these changes, we continue our spiritual quest and we turn to natural world to experience God's beautiful creation, devote time for silent prayer, meditation and spiritual reading. We did not forget to observe our empathy and sympathy towards the Covid 19 victims. We prayed for the recovery of the suffering victims, not forgetting to plead the Almighty God to secure the healthy neighbour. When the church building became 'out of bounds', sadly we were deprived of the opportunity to join the congregational prayer.

However, in our spiritual journey we became more aware that what is fundamental to our faith life is our personal relationship with God. The Gospel verses such as *'when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father who is unseen .Then your father who sees what is done in secret, will reward you'* (Matthew 6:6) *'you worship the Lord in spirit and Truth'* (John 4: 23-24) became real and they gave us new perspectives to read and reflect on scriptures in a different light. Christian spirituality is basically a personal experience with God and each one of us is invited to seek God in different moments. Hence, during Lockdown/quarantine related emergency curfew we were compelled to reflect on our faith and it made us aware to concentrate on things that matter our spirituality.

Lockdown/ quarantine emergency related curfew period gave us a wakeup call to return to the basic tents of our faith leaving out the externals that we have been so comfortable with. This return to the essentials leaving aside the externals was quite evident in other faith traditions as well specially during the global lockdown /quarantine related emergency curfew. Our Buddhists and Muslim brethren had to mark Vesak and Ramadan respectively staying at home giving prominence to basic tenets of their faith (Prathipathi puja) and refraining from doing (Amisa puja – external rituals). The prolonged Lockdown /quarantine related emergency curfew during Covid pandemic gave us a window of opportunity to get back to what is fundamental in our faith and focus on things that are very important. This window will not remain

open for a longer time. This outlook concerning our faith is seen as the way out for a healthy spirituality. This epidemic can also be a kairos, a moment of change to be grasped in the way things are done pastorally.

Fr. Lylie Fernando OMI

Quotes from Pope Francis

“Covid-19 is not God’s judgment, but a call to live differently”,

“Christ’s example and teaching show us that a preferential option for the poor is an essential criterion of our authenticity as his followers.”

“Capacity to warm hearts doesn’t come from books; it comes from the heart. If your heart burns with love for Jesus Christ, you are a good evangelizer”

WHAT DOES THE SCRIPTURE SAY OF THE LEADERS?

Fr. Suranga Gunasekara, OMI

Let me begin with some observation of the biblical language on our subject. According to the Revised Standard Version (RSV) of the New Testament (NT), there is only one reference to leaders, except "they be blind leaders of the blind, and both shall fall into the pit." (Mt 15, 14). However, the Hebrew Bible (HB) has 130 occurrences of the word 'lead,' in the verbal form, among which 66 are references to 'God leading,' 34 are to 'humans leading badly,' and 18 are neutral occurrences. The conclusion is evident: apart from God leading the people as the leader, leadership was not a popular subject among the people of God!

Nevertheless, the modern translations of the HB give a variety of options to translate the word "leader/s." Among those elders – of a tribe or a community; princes and rulers; judges, chiefs and captains – if there is a military connection; nobles, officers, kings, and heads; bishops and governors; pastors, prophets, saviours and shepherds; teachers, great men, mighty men of valour, overseers, wise and the able.

It would make an interesting study of leadership just to go through them and investigate their implications. At this point, it is better to propose a definition of leadership. The popular definition of Christian leadership

can be stated as follows, "which is rooted in Christ, grounded in prayer, and a relationship with God, sustained by the Spirit, dedicated to serving the people, and counting on God to foster a community of believers." In my opinion, this type of definition turns the biblical understanding of leadership upside down and inside out. Some scholars would hesitate to agree with the said opinion. Because from our early catechism-days, we were made to understand that authentic Christian leadership as servant-leadership by relying on the spiritual interpretation of the scripture texts, which insist that Jesus' followers take the last places while working on behalf of others. So much so, the traditional interpretation compels us to understand Jn 13, 1-15 as a text that speaks about the servanthood of Jesus rather than a prophetic action of his humiliating death. Therefore, the best plausible definition of a leader that we could draw from the scriptures is, "**the leader is the one who goes ahead, to show the way, and to inspire other people to follow**". I believe this understanding of leadership is based on cultural, contextual, and historical interpretations of the Scripture.

Let me now have a brief survey on the biblical and historical resources in order to have a vivid understanding of this. In ancient Israel, the term 'elder' was an imprecise way of referring to those who were recognized as the wisest and natural leaders in the community, because of the elders' authority and power were based on existing community relationships. These

were people to whom respect was instinctively given because of their age, maturity, and experience. However, with the Babylonian deportation, synagogues emerged as the places of study and worship, and some of these elders were appointed to oversee the well-being of these synagogue communities entrusted to them.

Leadership in the early Church

In the early Christian era, initially, leadership was grounded in the apostles themselves, and believers were directed by their teaching (Acts 2,42). However, a division of leadership function was deemed necessary when this small group of apostles had to set up priorities in directing the believers through the Christ-given mission (Acts 6,1-4). Deacons were appointed while the apostles devoted themselves to prayer and proclaiming the gospel. Eventually, the apostles' ministry took them beyond the church in Jerusalem, which necessitated further changes in the Christian community leadership structure. A passing reference to the 'elder' in Jerusalem community in Acts 11,30 suggests that the terminology of "elders," familiar to Jewish Christians, had been carried over from the synagogue to the early Christian church.

As the church spread beyond Israel, the Gentile congregations initiated by Paul arose within extended households and together in individual houses as places of meeting. The elders found among them were naturally recognized as the leaders of those communities. These

elders continued their role of overseeing, protecting, and caring for those “families” of believers. In Acts 20,28, we see Paul pleads with those elders to “guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to shepherd the Church of God.” The three terms for the Church leaders found in this passage – elder, overseer, and shepherd – arise as the language of leadership in the NT Church. Elders provided wisdom and maturity, overseers watched over, and shepherds fed, guided, and protected the Church.

The writers of the NT use these terms interchangeably for leaders in the Christian communities. Paul’s letter to the Philippians gives a clear indication that it is written to the Church and its overseers and deacons (Phil 1,1). In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he calls the leaders as those gifted by God to equip believers for the work of ministry and building up of the Church. Here he names them apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherd-teachers (Eph 4,11). The qualification for an overseer in Paul’s letter to Timothy includes the ability to teach (1 Tim 3,1-2). Further, in the same letter, Paul refers to how the Christian should treat its leaders, now named as elders (1 Tim 5,17-19). In the letter to Titus, the same apostle asks Titus to “appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1,5), and then Paul explains the characteristics of an overseer, “for the overseer must be above reproach as God’s steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain” (Titus 1,7). The first letter of Peter instructs the elders to “shepherd the flock” willingly and eagerly without domineering those

for whom they are responsible (1 Pet 5,1-3). Therefore we could say without any doubt, in the NT Church, the leaders were elders and overseers that oversaw and shepherded the Church while teaching (feeding) the believers of their respective communities. (NB. Some English Bible versions, including NRSV, wrongly translate the word *Episkopos* as bishop. However, it should be corrected as overseer or keeper).

In the early Church, the leaders are identified and chosen on the basis of maturity, character, and giftedness. Elders were those affirmed as mature and growing, “until we all attain to the unity of faith, and the knowledge of the son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4,13). The concern for an overseer’s character acknowledges that for one to oversee others, one needed to be watching over oneself (1 Tim 3, 1-7). The ability to shepherd, together with the ability to teach – sound knowledge of the matters concerning God and His plan for salvation- was recognized as a gift distributed by the Spirit as He determines.

Leaders serve on behalf of Christ, who is the head of the body, the Church. Leaders should always remember that Christ is the chief pastor or shepherd, and he is ultimately the overseer of the believers (Heb 13,20; 1 Pet 2,25; 5,4). The nature of Church leadership is best seen in a leader’s reflection of Christ’s relationship with his Church. **As Christ became the Shepherd of His flock**

(Cf. Jn. 21.15ff), the leaders of the Church are shepherds. They are servants assigned to care for the sheep. The leaders of the Church must treat people with dignity, offer hope and give meaning. They should restore broken relationship with God and one's neighbor (Lk 15,1ff).

“Whole theologies have been constructed without any reference to social justice because those people who constructed such theologies lived in a social context where questions about poverty and oppression did not arise at all, let alone as faith questions. “

-Albert Nolan, OP in *Hope in the Age of Despair*, p 14-15

**Inaugural Speech of
Fr. ROSHAN SILVA, OMI
the Provincial Leader of the Oblates of Colombo Province
on 21 February 2020.**

As I stand before you my dear brother Oblates, I feel I am duty bound to thank the Almighty God who, not only called me to this particular office as the Provincial of the Oblates of Colombo Province, but who called me also to the Oblate Religious and priestly way of life filling me with all the necessary talents, capabilities, values and attitudes. I am duty bound also to thank my father and mother and the rest of the family members. I am who I am today because of them. I thank my entire dear brother Oblates for choosing me to be your Provincial for the next 3 years. I thank you for the trust, faith and confidence you have placed in me. I thank also very Rev. Fr. Irwin Morais and the members of the former Provincial Council for shouldering the responsibility of the Administration for the past 3 years. I thank you for your commitment and the hard work.

As I take up the role of the Provincial I am very much conscious and aware that this particular office I have received to be a Provincial is not an ornament, nor is it a power received to pressurize, exert force or afflict pain on anybody. But it is a call, a vocation received to be a servant leader.

Knowing very well some of my own weaknesses and tendencies I said “yes” and accepted this office because I have

trust in God and in my brother Oblates. I am sure I will have also touches of martyrdom in my journey as the Provincial and I am prepared for it.

Looking at our Province, there are number of things that I would like to reflect with you this morning. And these points, I am going to reflect with you, become the priority/ priorities of my office as a Provincial.

1. **I see there is a lack of spirituality among us.** (I am not going to explain what spirituality is.) I see an erosion of certain values, traditions, discipline and consequently a lack of spirituality. For me building up a strong spirituality (personal/ community/ province level) is number 01 priority. All of us need to go back to the roots. If what we do (which we call our ministry/ or apostolate) is devoid of a spirituality, it becomes a mere function, a job, a profession, a business, an occupation, a career or a trade and you and I become mere administrators, controllers, supervisors, managers and even businessmen. Let us ask ourselves about the quality of our personal prayer, the time spent before the Lord.

C33 in the Rules and constitutions says; *“in prolonged silent prayer we make each day we let ourselves be moulded by the Lord and find in him the inspiration of our conduct.”* Please note, that it is not simply 5, 10 minutes, but a **prolonged** silent prayer, made each day and not once in a way, that we let ourselves be moulded by the Lord. Such a person would not allow his own emotions and tendencies to lead him; he will not allow himself to be led by social media, face book or

anything material. He allows himself to be led or moulded by the Lord. We all must be men of this nature. **Let us spend quality time with the Lord each day.** Then, let us ask, *‘what is the place I have given to the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, my personal confession, periodic spiritual direction, recitation of the Holy Rosary and the breviary?’* I might look a very outdated and old fashioned, traditionalistic and conservative priest. If one perceives in that manner, it is ok because I am very much convinced of the importance of the above-mentioned as they are the means of cultivating and rejuvenating a profound spirituality.

Let us continue to ask; what about my monthly Recollection, annual retreat. It is not a secret that many don’t attend the annual retreat and it is a social gathering even for those who attend. Let us put things right. I believe that these are the basics.

I am still speaking of spirituality. Can a person with a deep, profound spirituality or one who is deeply rooted in the Lord, write anonymous letters against one’s own brother Oblate? Can a person with a deep spirituality get into cliques, groups, gangs and start criticizing, gossiping and tarnishing the name of one’s own brother Oblate? Let us allow ourselves to be moulded and led by the Lord and not by emotions, feelings etc. If these types of habits are prevailing among us then there is a grave concern about our spirituality. That is why I consider, building up a profound spirituality as important. An appropriate question would be ‘what do people expect from

an Oblate': degrees, qualifications; No. they like to see a holy priest, more human and saintly.

2. Another thing which I consider as important to uphold, improve and maintain is the quality of our Oblate brotherliness or Oblate fraternity and brotherhood. We need to do away with individualism and clique and group mentality and consider everyone as our own brother. I would discourage having pressure groups, clubs etc. Let us embrace all, young and old, sick and retired and especially all those who are going through various crisis and difficulties in life. Tendency to mind our own business and mind your own business has to be overcome with more brotherliness, love, concern, sharing and care etc. **I believe and I am convinced of the importance of the need of coming together periodically as members of a Province not just for business and meetings but to share our life because we are a family.** Sometimes we criticize and complain against the leadership saying that; “we are appointed to a particular place to do a particular work and no leader, no superior came to visit us and to see how we manage our life.” Thus more animation and more frequent visits by the Provincial superior are important.

3. Apart from various portfolios like formation, ongoing formation, recruitment, parish ministry, finances etc. there is a grave need of establishing **an animation team** who would go around the Province conducting and animating the members and the missions.

4. When a group or a Congregation is developed and institutionalized and when there are more members, **I believe there has to be certain rules, principals, guidelines and practices, that must be followed by all, so that there will be order and discipline in the Province or in the Congregation.** Allowing one or the other to do what he thinks is best is detriment to the discipline and order and the good governance of the Province. Hence I would promote and expect the members to follow certain rules and disciplinary guidelines and I will personally supervise whether they are kept and adhered to by all. To explain this more I would quote some numbers from the CC and RR. *“We follow a master who became poor for our sake (C19) we are to avoid all luxury, all appearance of luxuries, all immoderate gain, and accumulation of possessions including land, private owned or privately using vehicles (C21)”*. By our vow of poverty we commit ourselves to a life of voluntary poverty. We renounce the right to use and to dispose lawfully on our own authority of anything of monetary value. **All we acquire either through our personal industry or through the work of the institute belongs to the community.** Likewise anything we receive as a pension, salary, as a subsidy or from insurance and other benefits belongs to the Congregation (C22). At times we come across among us individuals who don't contribute what they get as salary or any benefit to the community but grab everything possible from the Province or from the community. I like to call them parasites. We need to put certain things in order. In this regard I believe that the

Provincial Treasurer has a great responsibility in calling for accounts, requesting the communities and individuals to submit the accounts on time and not to grant allowance for the next month if they fail to submit the accounts on time etc.

5. I consider ministry of formation very important. I believe that there is a difference between a formator and a good professor or a lecturer. So in appointing a formator to a particular House of formation, it is not merely his educational qualifications and other degrees that must be taken into account, but above all whether he is truly a formator who is able to journey or accompany the candidates. **We should not simply train good professors and lecturers but good formators.** I consider it is my duty as the Provincial to visit the Formation Houses very regularly and sit with each candidate very regularly. In choosing Oblates for higher studies, it is not simply his taste and needs that must be considered, but the need of the Province. Hence as Religious our specialization in particular field must not be for the advantage of the person but for the wellbeing and the good of the whole Province and the Congregation at last.

6. Recruitment ministry is also a very important ministry. Hence there is a need to appoint a team for the recruitment ministry rather than appointing just one person. In a country like ours there are many ministries which can be done by Oblate Brothers (eg: missions like SVH, Suba Seth Gedara, Rajabima, catechetical work, La.Kri.Vi, youth ministry etc.). **Promotion of candidates for the Oblate Brotherhood has to be emphasized and considered important.** I invite all the

Oblates to be interested in the recruitment and the formation ministry. We all need to become a part of formation. You can personally talk to the youngsters and create in them a desire to be an Oblate. You may visit Houses of formation and come to know the students and talk to them of the ministry you are doing. You can invite the students to come to your place of ministry and spend a couple of weeks with you. It is important that we all pray for our students and our formators.

7. There is a practice in our Provinces of appointing the members of the Provincial Council for various portfolios.

But our experience has been that this was not very much successful. I personally consider sharing of my responsibility with my Councilors as important. I shall give them more powers to handle the particular responsibility. Once the portfolios are shared, I shall inform you and you may work with the respective Councilor.

8. Ongoing formation has to be considered very seriously.

A well planned on-going formation programme for every Oblate has to be organized by the Councilor in charge of ongoing formation and every Oblate ought to go through such periodic programme and renewal without any exception. **As mentioned earlier, the annual retreat must be taken seriously** and I will personally see that every Oblate participate in one of the annual retreats. We must value the tradition of attending the annual retreat as a group and the time of the retreat must be considered not as a social gathering but as a moment to experience the Lord in silence.

9. At present in our Province only the young Oblates come together very regularly. I would always appreciate and value such gatherings and encourage other groups also to meet very regularly so that our brotherliness can be enhanced. However I have a desire to have some programmes for the Oblates in their first 3 years after the Ordination and I will personally attend such programmes.

10. I consider important visiting every Oblate and community in their respective place of ministry and also visiting with them their work places and substations giving quality time. When time permits we shall visit you as a Council too.

11. Now coming to our Vision as a group of Oblates, I consider it is important to think and discern globally, without limiting our Vision to the particular Province only. Let me explain my point; in the past we have had Oblates who became part of the Oblate world, such as Assistant General, person in charge of JPIC, person representing Asia Oceania at the General formation Committee etc. but for some reason or other, we are no longer in these levels. Perhaps we, as a Province, failed to see things globally. As we know Sri Lanka is one of the Oldest Provinces of the Congregation and it is one that was begun by our Founder Himself. We have in record many academically qualified Oblates. **I feel we have lot of potentiality to contribute to the Congregation globally.** If a Province like ours is not going to do this, who else is going to do this? As an administration we shall together with you and with wider

consultation try to map up a direction for the future.

12. With my team of Councilors and consulting each and every Oblate in the Province, I wish to articulate and define a very clear Vision- Mission Statement for every Oblate Center; like Rajabima, Suba Seth Gedhara, Tissa Balasuriya Dahama Ketha, Oblate Missions, Kamatha, Youth Ministry etc. Once this Vision is accepted by the Province, it has to be carried out by the Particular Superior or the director of the Center or the mission and the total membership of the community. I believe that this will prevent a particular Oblate seeking permission from the Provincial to go to a particular Oblate Center or mission and try to do what he thinks best; like raring pigs, goats, cows, turkeys planting cashew trees, etc. or another saying; “send me to that particular Center or give me this particular Center and give me also 5 or six million Rupees, I will do this or that”. I will not like to hear something of that nature from any Oblate during my term of office as the Provincial. We hear this type of things from the Oblates when the Administration has no Clear Vision or plan for that particular Center. ‘Go and see what you can do’. It is not in my vocabulary. Instead I would say ‘Go to such and such a place and carry out the Vision Statement for that particular Center.’ Once a particular person or a group is appointed to a particular mission with a clear Vision and a job description, and as the work being carried out, I believe there has to be a well-planned and well organized periodic evaluation. This periodic evaluation is something very much lacking in our Province.

13. **I firmly believe that the Congregation exists for the sake of the Church.** Our Founder founded the Congregation in order to help the Church. That is why the very first words of the Preface to the Constitutions and Rules says; *“The Church that glorious inheritance purchased by Christ the Savior at the cost of his own blood has in our days been cruelly ravaged”*. So I believe that our Founder has a keen interest in supporting and helping the Church. However I am convinced also the fact that when we talk of the Church it is not merely the structural Church with its hierarchical structure that must be helped and served. **We, as Religious, must go beyond the structural Church and must promote and work for the Kingdom.** In this regard I believe that we should not just lend our members to various bishops and dioceses simply to fill gaps in their parishes and institutions. I am opened to accept any new parish in any Diocese including the Archdiocese of Colombo but only and only if a particular bishop of the Diocese is ready to enter into a written contract with the Oblates at least for 10- 15 years. However we need to have a clear Vision with regard to various Oblates with various and different talents and qualifications as to how to make use of them and to see where they can be planted so that they will be able to blossom well.

14. In various parts of the Oblate world we see various actions and programmers done to get the laity involved in our Oblate mission. **The spirituality, Vision and the Mission of St. Eugene is not a monopoly of the Oblate priests and brothers. It must also be shared with the laity as well.**

I believe that the MAMI apostolate and Oblate Missions cannot be limited to mere collecting money for various projects. Thus a very clear policy on laity and persons in charge of such ministry has to be formulated and adhered to under the supervision and the leadership of the Director of MAMI.

15. What makes an Oblate, an Oblate, is a very important question. What is the difference between an Oblate parish and a parish of a diocesan priest. Surely there is a difference and in fact our faithful very clearly see that difference. Our simple way of life, our accountability, and our closeness to the people, home visits we do very regularly, etc. are some of the things the people appreciate. While appreciating them, I would invite the Oblates serving in parishes to in-cooperate some of the Oblate activities in your parish programmers; such as La. Kri. Vi., promotion of Bakthi Probodanaya magazine, youth ministry, programme on JPIC etc., and spread the Oblate colour wherever you work.

16. The Provincial of the Colombo Province is also the Provincial of the Delegations and Missions of Japan, Korea, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Hence his care and responsibility is not limited to Colombo alone. The members of the other Units would like to see that their Provincial is interested in them and that he regularly visits them and writes to them personally. There is a need to send some Oblates to those Units too for they are our own. The General administration is interested in starting a mission in Jamaica and Ghana and they look up to

us for personnel. I believe that it is not who we are in Sri Lanka that matters but also who we are in the Oblate World. What contribution can we, make towards the Oblate world?

17. C. 42 says; “our members in distress, those who are sick or aged among us contribute greatly to the coming of God’s Kingdom. We will be particularly concerned for them and will surround them with all the affection that binds us together as members of the same family.” We have a well-furnished house for the sick and the elderly at Marian Grove, Kohuwala. Our seniors and the elders have done their best for the Province and our Province is what it is today because of them. Thus looking after the sick and elderly is very important. **I appreciate the Fathers and Brothers who were and who are in charge of the Marian Grove and who look after the elders and the sick very well.** With that concern and care we shall look into providing more facilities for the sick and the elders if necessary. I invite the sick and retired Oblates who are in different Houses to come to the Marian Grove. We assure you of better care. You don’t have to wait till you are brought to Marian Grove by an ambulance or on a wheel chair.

18. The place where you are now; No 40, Farm Road, Mattakkuliya, Colombo 15 is the Provincial House of the Colombo Province. It is our mother house. Thus you must always feel at home when you come here. You must feel free to come to your mother house for rest, relaxation and to have some happy times. I will see to it that your mother house will be truly a home for every Oblate and no Oblate would

feel indifferent or taken for granted. I would expect the Superior of De Mazenod House, the local bursar, the Provincial secretary, the clerical staff and the minor staff to work together to make this a real home, a family where every Oblate is welcomed and feel at home.

I thank Fr. Irwin Morais and his Council and the Provincial Bursar who did their best during the last 3 years. We appreciate your commitment and dedication. We shall try to continue whatever work you have initiated. My dear brother Oblates let us try to work together. Let us love one another and pray for each other. Thank you and May God bless you. May Our Saintly Founder whose Feast we celebrate today intercede on our behalf as we journey together.

Cardinal Basil Hume OSB on friendship

“In whatever context it arises, and always respecting the appropriate manner of its expression, love between two persons, whether of the same sex or of a different sex, is to be treasured and respected.....When two persons love, they experience in a limited manner in this world what would be their unending delight when one with God in the next. To love one another is in fact, to reach out to God who shares his loveableness with the one we love.”

- Quoted in the Editorial of the *Tablet*, 6/11/2010.

PROPHETIC MINISTRY IN THE CHURCH

The Second Vatican Council regarded the Church as being a spiritual organism in which from the earlier days there had been permanent ministries and charismatic ministries, all regarded as gifts of the Holy Spirit (LG 33, 35).

St. Paul, writing to the Thessalonians said, *“Do not stifle inspiration. Do not quench the Spirit but test everything and keep what is good”* (1 Thess 5:19-20). Can we therefore perceive of an institutional model in the Church that would give room for charismatic ministries to function well? This is possible if the hierarchical model recognizes the proper importance and relative independence of the charismatic ministries in the Church. Such a possibility requires that the guidance in the Church not be based entirely on the sacramental dimension but also on the charismatic as well.

St. Paul presents us with a list of ministries in the Church that he arranges according to their importance. He says, *“And God has appointed in the Church first the apostles, second the prophets, third teachers, then the workers of miracles, the healers, the helpers, the administrators, the speakers in Various kinds of tongues”* (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11). Implied in this statement is that these ministries are supposed to be permanently present in the Church with clear defined roles for the well-being of the Church.

Prophecy was taken as a permanent endowment of the

Church. Prophecy has to be a permanent, visible and tangible ministry like the hierarchy in the Church. The members of the hierarchy who have succeeded the presbyteroi and episcopoi (the community leaders of the nascent Church) regard themselves as those called to monopolise the ministry of prophecy and teaching as well. The dominance of the institutional leadership over those called to prophetic ministry has given way to pyramidally hierarchical Church (cf **Aloysius Pieris, SJ**, *Leadership Crisis in the Church*).

Although the growth of clericalism in the Church also made prophecy fade into the background, prophecy did not die in the Church. The lives of great saints like Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi and Catherine of Sienna show that the prophetic function remained alive and in lively tension with the institutional Church.

Today the theologians say that the institutional and the charismatic are distinct aspects of the Church. (LG 4, 12). This means that the magisterium as such cannot usurp this ministry from those called to it. The ministry of prophecy needs to be exercised in the Church. The Church needs men and women capable of discerning God's will in the history of our times and proclaim it with parrhesia or evangelical boldness.

“A Church in which the prophets have to keep silent declines and becomes a spiritless organization and its pastors would become mere bureaucrats. In such a Church people would be

*suffocated by the fumes of a decaying sacerdotalism...History has shown that when prophets are not given their say within the Church they rise up and condemn it from outside ‘ (Avery Dulles, SJ, *Successors of Prophets in the Church*).*

Walter Brueggeman in his book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, says prophets are essential not only for the Church but for humankind as well. Only prophets image different possibilities. There has to be a vision before implementation. Prophet’s task is to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on proposing alternative solutions and futures never thought of. A prophet has to propose new visions to enthuse and to energise people since it is the not yet, the promised and that which is about to begin, that can energise us, not what we really possess.”

Religious Orders as Institutional Prophetic Ministry

Some theologians see religious life as a kind of institutional prophetic ministry. According to **Thomas Merton** prophetic witness is integral to monastic life. It is called out of the world to live radically different from humanity at large. It is well positioned to see the present from God’s point of view and to discern the signs of the times more critically.

According to the **Congress on Religious life** held in 1993, religious life forms a liminal group in the Church. That is an alternative group, separated by its life style and ministry from the normal structures of society. It forms a liminal group by its life style of community, celibacy, option for the poor and

permanent discernment in search of the will of God. To live this way of life in all its radicalism is to be in the society in a manner distinct and somewhat distant from it. As religious, this is our prophecy. It is our way of being symbol of the Kingdom.

With Jesus a new reality entered this world: the reign of God. This is a challenging reality that people are drawn into it. In the end, they can do nothing but dedicate themselves totally and unconditionally to this Kingdom. The same Congress noted: *“Religious place themselves in the service of the Kingdom. This they do with the intention of being transparent signs, living parables, messianic anticipation of the full realization of the Kingdom. They attempt to represent existentially the poor, obedient and compassionate Christ in the world.”*

According to the **Michael Amaladoss, SJ** the religious are a “prophetic pole” in the Church. Their prophecy is not only directed to the world but also to the Church. By radically living and / or promoting through their apostolic action some of the values of the reign of God they are reminders of and invitations to a possible new world for all the People of God. They are also the cutting edge of the Church’s mission to the world, in so far as they symbolize in a specially visible way the radicalism of the Kingdom of God which is being proclaimed.

Joan Chittister: “It is not the loss of institution that religious must fear; it is the loss of the fire / heat of the charism itself. It

is the potential loss of the prophetic presence that strikes at the root of religious life today. Religious life is to remind the world of what it can be, of what it must be, of what it most wants to be; deep down at its best, at its most human core. Religious life lives at the edge of society to critique it, at the bottom of society to confront it, at the epicenter of society to challenge it. Religious life is a reminder of the will of God for the world.”

Founders of Religious Order: Francis, Dominic, Therese of Avila, Ignatius and others were often prophets and their prophetic message remains present in the communities they founded. These communities carry on the charismatic inspirations of their founders. Religious Orders came into existence in the 4th century. There were however antecedents.

In the early Church we find people who wanted to follow the Lord in a more radical way by renouncing possessions and marriage in order to be closer in fellowship with Him. They gave their witness which showed that they felt the Lord was inviting them to a different way of being His disciples, the way He himself had lived so radically. The early Christians lived in a society that did not share their values. So they automatically became a “contrast society”.

When the Church became the state religion, Church ceased to be a contrast society. At that moment prophetic charism rose anew within the Church and began to protest. Religious life came into existence as a protest movement against a Church

that had conformed too much to society at large. Religious communities arose whenever Church forgot and betrayed its social mission as well. **Religious life was seen as following the model of the prophets of O.T.** Whether it is a contrast society or radical discipleship, both witness to the fact that there always seems to be a need within the Church for healing and a reminder of the basic call for a therapeutic task since these charismatic movements easily become domesticated and then institutionalisation of the prophetic ministry takes place.

Following Jesus Christ, the Religious have to demonstrate the innovative function of Religious life in the concrete circumstances in our time. They need to help the Church to move out of entrenched positions, read the signs of the times, show where Church's mission should now move to. There is also danger for the Church, as a large scale institution, going for accommodation and questionable compromise, making the gospel livable in a consumer society, watering down its radicalism to the point that it does not hurt any more. The task of the prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and to evoke an alternative to the consumerism and perception of the dominant culture around us. It is a therapeutic (corrective role) of Religious life. The innovative function of Religious life needs to be manifested also in the witnessing of community living where justice, love and brotherhood / sisterhood are visible manifestations of the final community which God intends (**Norbert Lohfink** (*Theology Digest*, 33 (1986/) p 208:

Prophets without enemies are no prophets. Their vocation is first a charism, not an office. Model of leadership within Religious Orders should be a challenge within the Church for better cooperation and collegiality.

Prophetic criticism

Are Religious today really offering the prophetic critique to the Church and society as a whole? Have Religious Orders betrayed their calling so that God must desire other means to take up this task? Prophets live in a given context to which they offer an alternative through their word, action and life. Since they challenge life, they have to reckon with opposition. The emergence of small communities and community movements in the Church of today is a hopeful sign that God is furnishing the Church with a new prophetic charism. Their very existence is a prophetic criticism within the Church and they offer a much needed contrast society to society at large.

Today the traditional forms of Religious life might not suffice to serve as God's therapy for the Church. Alongside Religious Orders, God might call other forms of community, including all of the faithful, to carry on God's therapy for the Church. Renewal of Religious life is needed if they do not wish to be bypassed in God's desire to reach all human beings and to make God's prophetic critique heard.

Prophetic criticism in Sri Lanka

Are we, the Religious in Sri Lanka, enlightened by the Word

of God, open to the cries of the poor in pain and need? Or are we in deep dogmatic slumber? Are the members of the Sri Lankan Conference of the Major Religious Superiors (CMRS) also in deep dogmatic slumber?

As a Sri Lankan Religious priest, I was moved to ask these questions since I do not hear or read about the action of CMRS on behalf of our people in pain and need.

For example,

1. On behalf of the Estate workers when they were crying to get a just wage for their work? Diocesan Bishop Raymond Wickramasinghe did speak on their behalf.
2. On behalf of the poor families struggling to educate their children?
3. Has CMRS made a statement regarding the 20th Amendment to the Constitution of Sri Lanka, the Environmental issues which affect Sri Lanka and the Port City?
4. CMRS was silent when W. Anthony Fernando, an active fisherman was shot dead in Chilaw on February 15, 2012 while the Bishops' Conference conveyed its deepest condolences to the bereaved family and the fishing community and condemned the brutality carried out with disregard to the value of life.
5. Did the Religious in Negombo (with many Convents /

Institutions) and CMRS show solidarity of compassion when the fishermen in Negombo Region were protesting against the price hike of fuel which affected their lives in 2016? There were only 2 Sisters of Perpetual Help and an elderly Good Shepherd Sister showing solidarity of compassion.

6. Think of the number of priests and Religious Sisters being sent abroad to reside among the expatriates to serve them while more than 600 Catholic fisher-families in the island of Baththalangunduwa (off Kalpitiya) are deprived of the active presence of a resident priest in close proximity to them in order to guide them. The passenger boat from Kalpitiya jetty takes more than 3 hours to reach this island. So socio-pastoral action from a distance is contradictory (action in distans repugnant). Don't these Catholic fisher-families living in the island have the right to have the socio-pastoral care of a resident priest?

The Oblate Provincial (Colombo) however expressed his willingness in 2013 to the Bishop of Chilaw to send Oblates to reside and serve those migrant fisher-families in that island.

Let us not forget that Jesus, Prophet and Saviour, was killed because he cared for the poor and the abandoned. He was born to reaffirm the inherent dignity of each person, affirm equality and inclusion by bringing together the scattered and empowering them to have abundant life.

Fr. Emmanuel Fernando, OMI

“Today’ religious men and women need to be prophetic, capable of waking up the world, of showing they are a special breed who have something to say to the world of today.”

– Pope Francis

**“DO NOT QUENCH THE SPIRIT,
DO NOT DESPISE PROPHECYING.”**

- St. Paul (1 Thess. 5:19)

Here is the full text of Pope Francis' homily on the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul delivered June 29, 2020 at the Basilica of St. Peter, Rome.

UNITY AND PROPHECY

On the feast of the two Apostles of this City, I would like to share with you two keywords: unity and prophecy. We celebrate together two very different individuals: Peter, a fisherman who spent his days amid boats and nets, and Paul, a learned Pharisee who taught in synagogues. When they went forth on mission, Peter spoke to the Jews and Paul to the pagans. And when their paths crossed, they could argue heatedly, as Paul is unashamed to admit in one of his letters (cf Gal 2:11). In short, they were two very different people, yet they saw one another as brothers, as happens in close-knit families where there may be frequent arguments but unflinching love. Yet the closeness that joined Peter and Paul did not come from natural inclinations, but from the Lord. He did not command us to like one another, but to love one another. His is the one who unites us, without making us all alike. He unites us in our differences.

Today's first reading brings us to the source of this unity. It relates how newly born Church was experiencing a moment of crisis: Herod was furious, a violent persecution had broken out, and the Apostle James had been killed.

Herod was furious, a violent persecution had broken out, and the Apostle James had been killed. And now Peter had been arrested. The community seemed headless, everyone fearing

for his life. Yet at that tragic moment, no one ran away, no one thought about saving his own skin, no one abandoned the others, but all *joined in prayer*. From prayer, they drew strength, from prayer came a unity more powerful than any threat. The text says that “while Peter was kept in prison, the Church prayed fervently to God for him” (Acts 12:5). Unity is the fruit of prayer, for prayer allows the Holy Spirit to intervene, opening our hearts to hope, shortening distances, and holding us together at times of difficulty.

Let us notice something else: at that dramatic moment, no one complained about Hero’s evil and his persecution. No one abused Herod – and we are so accustomed to abuse those who are in charge. It is pointless, even tedious, for Christians to waste their time complaining about the world, about society, about everything that is not right. Complaints change nothing. Let us remember that complaining is the second door that closes us off from the Holy Spirit, as I said on Pentecost Sunday. The first is narcissism, the second discouragement, the third pessimism. Narcissism makes you look at yourself constantly in a mirror; discouragement; discouragement leads to complaining and pessimism to thinking everything is dark and bleak. These three attitudes close the door to the Holy Spirit. Those Christians did not cast blame; rather, they prayed. In that community, no one said: “If Peter had been more careful, we would not be in this situation”. No one. Humanly speaking, there were reasons to criticize Peter, but no one criticized him. They did not complain about Peter behind his back; they talked to God. Today we can ask: “Are we protecting our unity, our unity in the Church, with prayer? Are we praying for one another?” What would happen

if we prayed more and complained less if we had a more tranquil tongue? The same thing that happened to Peter in prison, now as then, so many closed doors would be opened, so many chains that bind would be broken. We would be amazed, like the maid who saw Peter at the gate and did not open it but ran inside, astonished by the joy of seeing Peter (cf. *Acts* 12:10-17). Let us ask for the grace to be able to pray for one another.

St. Paul urged Christians to pray for everyone, especially those who govern (cf. *1 Tim* 2:1-3). “But this governor is...”, and there are many adjectives. I will not mention them, because this is neither the time nor the place to mention adjectives that we hear directed against those who govern. Let God judge them; let us pray for those who govern! Let us pray: for they need prayer. This is a task that the Lord has entrusted to us. Are we carrying it out? Or do we simply talk, abuse, and do nothing? God expects that when we pray we will also be mindful of those who do not think as we do, those who have slammed the door in our face, those whom we find it hard to forgive. Only prayer unlocks chains, as it did for Peter, only prayer paves the way to unity.

Today we bless the pallia to be bestowed on the Dean of the College of Cardinals and the Metropolitan Archbishops named in the last year. The pallium is a sign of the unity between the sheep and the Shepherd who, like Jesus, carries the sheep on his shoulders, so as never to be separated from it. Today too, in accordance with a fine tradition, we are united in a particular way with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Peter and Andrew were brothers, and whenever possible, we exchange fraternal visits on our

respective feast days. We do so not only out of courtesy but as a means of journeying together the goal that the Lord points out to us: that of full unity. We could not do so today because of the difficulty of travel due to the coronavirus, but when I went to venerate the remains of Peter, in my heart I felt my beloved brother Bartholomew. They are here, with us.

The second word is prophecy. *Unity and prophecy*. The apostles were *challenged by Jesus*. Peter heard Jesus' question: "Who do you say I am?" (cf. Mt 16:15). At that moment he realized that the Lord was not interested in what others thought, but in Peter's personal decision to follow him. Paul's life changed after a similar challenge from Jesus: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? (Acts 9:4). The Lord shook Paul to the core: more than just knocking him down to the ground on the road to Damascus, he shattered Paul's illusion of being respectably religious. As a result, the proud Saul turned into Paul, a name that means "small". These challenges and reversals are followed by prophecies: "You are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my Church" (Mt 16:18); and for Paul: "He is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel" (Acts 9:15).

Prophecy is born whenever we allow ourselves to be challenged by God, not when we are concerned to keep everything quiet and under control. Prophecy is not born from my thoughts, from my closed heart. It is born if we allow ourselves to be challenged by God. When the Gospel overturns certainties, prophecy arises. Only someone who is open to God's surprises can become a prophet. And there they

are Peter and Paul, prophets who look to the future. Peter is the first to proclaim that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 15:16). Paul, who considers his impending death: “From now on there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord will award to me” (2 Tim 4:8).

Today we need prophecy, but real prophecy, not fast talkers who promise the impossible, but testimonies that the Gospel is possible. What is needed are not miraculous shows. It makes me sad when I hear someone say, “We want a prophetic Church”. All right. But what are you doing, so that the Church can be prophetic? We need lives that show the miracle of God’s love. Not forcefulness, but forthrightness. Not palaver, but prayer. Not speeches, but service. Do you want a prophetic Church? Then start serving and be quiet. Not theory, but testimony. We are not to become rich, but rather to love the poor. We are not to save up for ourselves, but to spend ourselves for others. To seek not the approval of this world, of being comfortable with everyone –here we say: “being comfortable with God and the devil”, being comfortable with everyone; no this is not prophecy. We need the joy of the world to come. Not better pastoral plans that seem to have their own self-contained efficiency, as if they were sacraments, efficient pastoral plans, no. We need pastors who offer their lives: *lovers of God*. That is how Peter and Paul preached Jesus, as men in love with God. At his crucifixion, Peter did not think about himself but about his Lord, and, considering himself unworthy of dying like Jesus, asked to be crucified upside down. Before his beheading, Paul thought only of offering his life; he wrote that he wanted to be “poured out like a libation” (2 Tim 4: 6). That was prophecy. Not words. That was prophecy, the prophecy that changed history.

Dear brothers and sisters, Jesus prophesied to Peter: “You are Peter and on this rock, I will build my Church”. There is a similar prophecy for us too. It is for us too. It is found in the last book of the Bible, where Jesus promises his faithful witnesses “a white stone, on which a new name is written (Rev 2: 17). Just as the Lord turned Simon into Peter, so he is calling each one of us, in order to make us living stones with which to build a renewed Church and a renewed humanity. There are always those who destroy unity and stifle prophecy, yet the Lord believes in us and he asks us: “Do you want to be builder of unity?” Do you want to be prophet of my heaven on earth? Brothers and sisters, let us be challenged by Jesus, and find the courage to say to him: “Yes, I do!”

Courtesy: Zenith

Mary is the only woman mentioned by name in the Koran 34 times while Mary’s name appears in the Gospels 19 times).

OUR DEEP FAILURE IN CHARITY

Saint Eugene de Mazenod, the founder of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the Religious Congregation to which I belong, left us with these last words as he lay dying: —Among yourselves, charity, charity, charity. I don't always live that, though I wish I could, especially today.

We are in a bitter time. Everywhere there is anger, condemnation of others, and bitter disagreement; so much so that today we are simply unable to have a reasonable discussion on any sensitive political, moral, or doctrinal issue. We demonize each other to the point where any attempt to actually reason with each other (let alone to reach agreement or compromise) mostly just deepens the hostility. If you doubt this, simply watch the newscasts any evening, read any newspaper, or follow the discussion on most moral and religious questions.

The first thing that is evident is the naked hatred inside our energy and how we tend to justify it on moral and religious grounds. This is our protest: we're fighting for truth, decency, justice, God, family, church, right dogma, right practice, for Christ himself, so our anger and hatred are justified. Anger is justified, but hatred is an infallible sign that we are acting in a manner contrary to truth, decency, justice, God, family, church, right dogma, right practice, and Christ. It would be hard to argue that this kind of energy issues forth from God's spirit and does not source itself elsewhere.

Looking at Jesus we see that all his energies were directed towards unity. Jesus never preached hatred, as is clear from the Sermon on the Mount, as is illustrated in his great priestly

prayer for unity in John's Gospel, and as is evident in his frequent warnings to us to be patient with each other, to not judge each other and to forgive each other.

But one might object: what about Jesus' own (seemingly) bitter judgments? What about him speaking harshly of others? What about him losing his temper and using whips to drive the money-changers out of the temple? Indeed, what about his statement: I have come to bring fire to this earth?

These statements are perennially misinterpreted and used falsely to rationalize our lack of genuine Christian love. When Jesus says that he has come to bring fire to this earth and wishes it were already blazing, the fire he is referring to is not the fire of division but the fire of love. Jesus made a vow of love, not of alienation. His message provoked hateful opposition, but he did not self-define as a cultural or ecclesial warrior. He preached and incarnated only love, and that sometimes sparked its antithesis. (It still does.) He sometimes triggered hatred in people, but he never hated in return. Instead, he wept in empathy, understanding that sometimes the message of love and inclusivity triggers hatred inside of those who for whatever reason at that time cannot fully bear the word love. As well, the incident of him driving the money-changers out of the temple, forever falsely cited to justify our anger and judgment of others, has a very different emphasis and meaning. His action as he cleanses the temple of the people who were (legitimately) exchanging Jewish currency for foreign money in order let foreigners buy what they needed to offer sacrifice, has to do with him clearing away an obstacle in the way of universal access to God, not with anger at some particular people.

We frequently ignore the Gospel. Factionalism, tribalism,

racism, economic self-interest, historical difference, historical privilege, and fear perennially cause bitter polarization and trigger a hatred that eats away at the very fabric of community; and that hatred perennially justifies itself by appealing to some high moral or religious ground. But the Gospel never allows for that. It never lets us bracket charity and it refuses us permission to justify our bitterness on moral and religious grounds. It calls us to a love, an empathy and a forgiveness that reach across every divide so as to wish good and do good precisely to those who hate us. And it categorically forbids rationalizing hatred in its name or in the name of truth, justice, or right dogma.

The late Michael J. Buckley, looking at the bitter polarization in our churches, suggests that nothing justifies our current bitterness: —The sad fact stands, however, that it is frequently no great trick to get religious men and women to turn on one another in some terrible form of condemnation. Wars, even personal wars, are terrible realities, and the most horrible of these are often self-righteously religious. For deceived or split off under the guise of good, under the rubrics of orthodoxy or liberality, of community or of personal freedom, even of holiness itself, factions of men and women can slowly disintegrate into pettiness or cynicism or hostility or bitterness. In this way the Christian church becomes divided.

We need to be careful inside our cultural and religious wars. There is never an excuse for lack of fundamental charity.

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OBLATION MAKES US DISCIPLES AND PROPHETS

Introduction

When we pronounce publicly our triple religious vows in the Church and embrace the evangelical counsels as consecrated men, we automatically make ourselves disciples of Jesus, our Lord and Master, and share in his prophetic mission. Sometime back (1981), there was a beautiful book on religious life, written by a Salesian Biblical writer, Fr. Francis J. Maloney, with the above mentioned title, about the nature and dynamics of consecrated life. He was presenting a biblical model for religious life, not in abstract but on the qualities of life as a poor, chaste and obedient person in imitation of the very life of Jesus of Nazareth. The 1996 post-synodal document on consecrated life “*Vita Consecrata*” showed, how religious life continuously swings between Tabor and Calvary. Tabor stands for moments and God-experiences of ecstasy and joy in the spirit (*Vita Consecrata*, nn. 14-16) and Calvary stands for moments and experiences of trial, temptation, doubt, discouragement, anxiety, clouds of the unknowing and dark night of the soul. The paschal dimensions of religious life are thus clearly portrayed in this document.

Discipleship and prophetism in our Oblate Charism flow from this spiritual experience. The Oblates therefore are disciples of Jesus Christ and prophets of God’s Kingdom.

Evangelical Counsels

Introducing the section on the evangelical counsels, the Oblate Constitutions and Rules (CCRR) state: “Our mission requires that, in a radical way we follow Jesus who was chaste and poor and who redeemed humankind by his obedience. That is why through a gift of the Father, we choose the way of the evangelical counsels” (C 12). The spirituality of Jesus was his total commitment to do Father’s will, from Bethlehem to Calvary. His life was completely consumed with love for his Father. None of what he said or did was his own but the Father’s will. It was a life of love and compassion also for others, particularly to the sinners, the marginalized and the poor: the blind, the lame, the deaf etc.

1. Poverty

The poverty of Jesus was his total dependence on his Father and Father’s paternal divine providence. That is why he did not need two tunics and did not confide in money but walked freely into homes of the rich and of the poor, and was also ready to welcome all, irrespective of social class and ethnic difference, the publicans and sinners, rich Pharisees and above all sinners and the despised of society like the lepers. He trusted in the liberality of the creator who clothes the lilies in the field that are arrayed far more beautiful than King Solomon in all his glory. (Mt. 6:24-34). He taught his disciples too to trust in divine providence and the goodwill of others. In the celebrated discourse he gave to the seventy-two

disciples before sending them on their mission, one finds all the evangelical qualities that should characterize any Kingdom worker and disciple of Christ. The most important spiritual teaching is that the poverty of Christ enriches us (2 Cor 8:9). The most evident form of opting for voluntary poverty in imitation of Christ is to detach ourselves from material possessions such as land, property, monetary security etc.. It is significant that as a response to the earliest Christian message proclaimed by the apostles, the christian communities had a life of sharing, the rich selling their goods and laying it at the feet of the apostles.

Poverty was a way of life embraced by the early hermits in the desert and by the early contemplative Orders. Their motto was; “pray and work, work and pray”. All they earned by the sweat of their brow was shared by the community. This tradition later was strongly radicalized in the monastic Orders. The rich young man, whom Jesus called to be a perfect disciple, found his riches and great possessions a huge obstacle preventing him from entering the company of Jesus (Mt. 19:21).

It is not without reason that the first Pope from the third-world, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio SJ. of Buenos Aires, who lived in a poor apartment taking care of a sick brother-Jesuit, cooking his own food, travelling by public metro and often ministering to the distant interior barrios of the city taking public transport, compelled himself to launch a Church of the poor for the poor. Pope Francis wishes to be simply attired

without the usual papal ornaments, thus portraying himself as the successor of Simon Peter, the fisherman of Galilee, than that of the Roman Emperor with its pompous flair. He brought this simplicity of life-style into the Vatican as well by refusing to live in the Apostolic Palace, choosing rather to live in the guest-house of the visiting Cardinals.

Hence it is evident that one cannot hope to live discipleship of Jesus without imitating Jesus' poverty and his utter abandonment to God's providence. The prophetic dimension of our Oblate poverty comes from the fact that the choice of voluntary poverty is *a powerful means not only of collective witness, but also a means "to contest the excesses of power and wealth* and to proclaim the coming of a new world freed from selfishness and open to sharing (Cons.20).

There is a tendency today to amass wealth which results in the growth of poverty. The policy of liberal economies, which many countries pursue, marginalizes the poor. In some countries this situation often leads to unrest and violence.

The golden calf of the Bible appears today in various forms of idolatry of money which in biblical terms is pure and simple worship of Mammon (idol-worship). Jesus had said very clearly that one cannot serve two masters and he defines them in terms of God (worship in spirit and truth) and money. It is a question of loving one and hating the other. These two do not seem to be inter-changeable! It is not a two-way street (Mt. 6:24). Our life of sharing the fruits of our work and assets of whatever nature are a means of condemning this worldly trend

that attaches too much of importance to worldly goods instead of giving them their relative value. If one gives an absolute value to money, profit and commodity, then they turn out to become forms of the mammon of iniquity. What is sinful and anti-Kingdom is the excess in the matter of using material goods. Our Oblate Constitutions instruct us to learn from the poor with whom we have to identify, drawing lessons from their life of patience, hope and solidarity (Cons.20 b).

As today's prophets therefore, the Oblates challenge these worldly tendencies that smack of mammon, (inordinate love of money and property). The Oblates can proclaim a model of a life-style of sharing material goods in a bid to foster solidarity and give back dignity to the poor, empowering them too, to live according to their human dignity. It will safeguard their rights to work, health and education of their children whilst ensuring their dignity, security and future.

2. Chastity

Consecrated chastity in our Oblate missionary life is lived through a life of celibacy that is freeing us to totally give ourselves to the Lord and to his people whom we serve. It is a freedom to love everyone without reserve or distinction: the young and the old, the children and the youth, the aged and the sick etc and very particularly the unloved, the rejected, the marginalized, the helpless and the lonely.

In the history of religious and missionary life, all those who opted for a spirituality of discipleship and imitation of the

Divine Master, decided to live a life of celibate chastity. Chastity and celibacy are more a matter of the heart and mind than that of the body. Of course St. Paul has several teachings about chastity in Christian life. “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been purchased at a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:19–20). “The body, however, is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body; God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power” (1 Corinthians 6: 13 –14). “Do you not know that the unjust will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators nor idolaters nor adulterers nor boy prostitutes nor sodomites nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9–10). Psychologically and in personality language, chastity as the Catholic Catechism teaches is the “successful integration of sexuality within the person” (CCC 2337). Once again our model is Christ. Evangelical chastity has a redemptive value.

St. Pope John Paul II had developed beautifully the theme of the theology of the Body, in one of his much celebrated writings, helping us to understand it as a gift, a grace and a responsibility (1997).

The virtues of chastity and modesty have to be reinstated in a pleasure-driven social ethos. The life of the evangelical counsel of celibate chastity proves to be a powerful force in overhauling the crooked thinking that corrupts the minds of

our generations, both the young and the old. Much psychological and emotional damage can ensue in this field of human behavior. The prophetic dimension of celibate chastity in religious life is well stated in CCCR: “By this option we consecrate ourselves to the Lord and at the same time, give ourselves to the people we serve: we thereby free ourselves for a love which reaches out to everyone and challenges the tendency to possess and use others, for selfish purposes” (Cons. 15). It is also a means to spreading the spirit of self-control and temperance. Religious see celibate chastity as a form of perfect charity which will only be revealed and experienced fully in the Kingdom (ibid). Chastity whether in ordinary Christian life or in religious life is an antidote to today’s culture of hedonism which brings back the old Greek epicurean philosophy of life which taught the ethics of maximum pleasure at minimum pain. Pedagogically, we can show that in a celibate and chaste life one can develop the riches of the heart, affirm life and love and express true and authentic affection (Cons. 16).

3. Obedience

Religious obedience in the discipleship of the Lord and in the evangelical life-style is the complete surrender of one of our greatest gifts, namely our personal freedom. Obedience inspired by the sense of mission gives us a tremendous amount of freedom from many human encumbrances in order to be available for our life and work. It makes easier for our superiors to assign us for tasks demanded by the Oblate

mission. Cons. 25 says: “By obedience we become the servants of all”. The prophetic dimension of obedience is enunciated in the following manner: “Challenging the spirit of domination, we stand as a sign of that new world wherein persons recognize their close inter-dependence”. The tendency in today’s competitive culture is supremacy, domination and superseding others in order to stay superior and above others and to be showered with laurels for high-level performances. This competitive spirit has intruded into practically every sphere of life.

One has to rise from the level of passive dependence on others, avoid the spirit of independence that inclines to self-assertion whilst marginalizing others, leading to the idol worship of self. The best position is that of inter-dependence which is the pathway to community, solidarity and inter-communion. A common mission will facilitate this personal journey. In religious and missionary groups, inter-dependence is vital for survival and effective-ness, not efficiency. Oblate Constitutions and Rules say that obedience that is spiritually and religiously motivated requires detachment from our own will and a deep sense of the Church (Cons. 25 b). Our discipleship is rooted in the obedience of Christ who came to accomplish his Father’s will. He always did the works of the Father and challenged his audiences to believe and trust in him on these very grounds. Hence, discernment is very much required when answering the call to obedience, when one is faced with the possibility of multiple options. It helps one to answer the call of mission, the ultimate criterion in discerning

God's will . It is therefore not the submission of a slave to the will of a superior, but a loving embrace of God's will in the interest of the mission. It is an act of love and charity.

One of the scriptural texts that focuses on the theme of Christian obedience is contained in the teaching which St. Paul gives in the letter to the Galatians. Obedience here is interpreted in terms of freedom: submission to the will of the spirit of God, compelled by the Gospel. It is said that we were freed by Christ for freedom (Gal 5:1). Thus freed, one must not allow this very freedom to be an excuse for self-indulgence; through love, one becomes a servant to one another person (vs.13).

There are other powerful texts that teach about freedom and obedience. "The Lord is Spirit and where there is the Spirit, there is freedom" (2 Cor 3:17). It is obedience to truth that brings us to the threshold of freedom: "If you continue in My word, you are truly My disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:32). This Johanne text tags beautifully the themes of discipleship and obedience to the divine Word. We must remember that Jesus addressed these words not only to his disciples but also, to the Jews who were among his listeners of this particular discourse. Hence, the obedience which characterizes discipleship by nature will bring in a freedom to be at the service of others and to offer worship in spirit and truth as well (Jn 4:24). Oblate obedience therefore is clearly evangelical, in imitation of Jesus the obedient one. It is redemptive as we engage in our mission of

diffusing the Gospel especially among the poor.

We see this tradition of Oblate obedience in the response of the first missionaries who were assigned to distant and vast areas unknown to them such as USA, Northern Canada among the Eskimos, among tribals in South Africa and in distant Asia such as Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Both the founder (St. Eugene de Mazenod) who gave the obedience and those who went on obedience were inspired to respond to the most urgent needs of the churches in these countries and continents. Thus, obedience facilitated the zealous missionary ventures and journeys of the first Oblate pioneers of foreign missions, beginning from the time of the Oblate founder. A fully obedient religious surely would be the most free person, since it is an option in the interest of the Kingdom of God.

Conclusion

Amidst the plethora of literature that has come out in the recent past on religious life, priesthood and missionary vocation, there had been too much emphasis on activism. It is a pity that too much emphasis is laid on ministry for peace and justice and social engagement in the ranks of those in consecrated life, that there isn't a proportionately corresponding insistence on contemplation, prayer (both personal and communitarian), detachment and self-denial. For without a life that is contemplatively prayerful, nothing effective can be achieved of lasting spiritual value in the Church's work of evangelization. Much of the great defects in

the ranks of those who have given themselves to God's service and of his people, has been traced to sheer absence of prayer, contemplation and community sharing: the lack of a deep and profound spirituality. Missionary zeal has to emerge from the warmth and exuberance of charity and shared contemplation of the Word of God in community, as Pope Francis reminded the Oblate capitulants of the last General Chapter (36th chapter: Sept – Oct. 2016) Only those moved by the Spirit of God can pronounce a word of prophecy and only those who are with the Master can become authentic disciples. We are called to be with him and to be associated with his work of realizing the Kingdom of God. This is the first building-block of our vocation. None can live up to the prophetic expression of the vowed and missionary life, unless they are men of God: saints. Even in the midst of heightened activity, moments of silence, personal prayer and contemplation must have their due place in imitation of Jesus who took to prayer in solitude so often amidst his ministry of preaching and healing. Being disciples of the Lord and prophets of his Kingdom necessitate a total spirit-activated awareness that energizes all those who wish to become evangelizers. That is why the Lord Jesus called his first disciples away from their secular engagements of family and work, kept them in his company, becoming an example and work, kept them in his company, becoming an example of kingdom values, simplicity of life and prayer. Only then, did he send them to take on the work of evangelization going amongst the people to preach, to heal and to reconcile.

Evidently, there is a relation between discipleship, prophetic witness and the mission of evangelization since vowed life is a dynamic reality interacting with the world that needs to be evangelized so that the Kingdom of God could be built up and made to grow as the mustard seed (Matthew (13:31–32), Mark (4:30–32), and Luke (13:18–19). Further through these evangelical activities the disciples would become the leaven, the salt and the light of the world (Mt 5:13). The command of the Risen Lord was that with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, his disciples be witnesses to the entire world beginning from Jerusalem (Acts 1:8) It is the Spirit acting in the disciples and prophets that will accompany all activities of evangelization.

Fr. Leopold Ratnasekera OMI

“Love or service that saves us is that which makes us lay down our life for others (Jn 15:13) as Jesus did. Such self-sacrifice made out of love for other humans, therefore, is the authentic worship of a priest-victim”

– Aloysius Pieris, SJ

“Compassion is a response to suffering...The experience of compassion is the experience of suffering or feeling with someone.”

– Albert Nolan, OP

“Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion and anguish.”

- Henri Nouwen

EDWARD SCHILLEBEECKX

A HERALD OF GOD AMONG US

by Mary Catherine Hilkert

“That baby is God.” When asked about his first conscious memory of Jesus, the Flemish theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, who died in 2009 just before Christmas, recalled those words of his father as he pointed to the infant Jesus in the large Christmas crib in their home.

Schillebeeckx, who helped to revitalize interest in Jesus and to reshape the study of Christology in the second half of the 20th century, related the family story to an Italian journalist in 1982 on the occasion of his reception of the Erasmus Prize for contributions to European culture. He was the first theologian ever to be so honoured.

If the graduate students at the University of Notre Dame are any indication, Schillebeeckx’s legacy continues. Just a month before his death, the students who were enrolled in a doctoral seminar on his thought, organized a birthday party in honor of the Dominican theologian who was to turn 95 the following day (Nov. 12). The participants were invited to bring a favorite passage from Schillebeeckx’s writings to share with the group.

The party would have delighted the scholar, who once described Jesus as a “copious host” and who pointed to his inclusive table companionship as a sign of the kingdom of God. Given Schillebeeckx’s lifelong concern to communicate the Christian faith in terms that spoke to younger generations

and to those who had serious intellectual questions about Christian belief, Schillebeeckx would have been pleased to see the range of the students' selections, from his early, groundbreaking volume *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, to the final volume of his Christological trilogy, *Church: The Human Story of God*, and his two collections of homilies, *God Among Us: The Gospel Proclaimed* and *For the Sake of the Gospel*.

He might, in fact, have been most gratified by the selection of the one non-theologian in the group, who chose to read a key section from the final part of Schillebeeckx's *Christ* book, which highlights a major theme in his later writings -- "God does not want human beings to suffer."

That conviction was at the core of Schillebeeckx's massive two volumes on Jesus and salvation written in the 1970s (appearing in translation in the United States as *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* in 1979, and *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* in 1980).

Writing in the context of radical and senseless human suffering around the globe and growing ecological devastation, Schillebeeckx wanted to retell the story of Jesus as disclosing the mystery of a God "bent toward humanity" in compassion, not a God who demanded suffering and death as recompense for sin. In one of his memorable ways of capturing this mystery, Schillebeeckx wrote: "God's cause is the human cause" (and the cause of all of God's creation).

As with his Christmas memory, Schillebeeckx traced the roots of his own Christian faith to his childhood. The sixth of 14 children, Edward Cornelius Florentius Alfons Schillebeeckx

was born into a middle-class Flemish Catholic family in Antwerp on Nov. 12, 1914, soon after the German occupation of Belgium. After his primary education in Kortenberg (between Louvain and Brussels), Schillebeeckx attended a Jesuit boarding school in Turnhout. Influenced by mentors there as well as by his older brother, who was a Jesuit missionary in India, Schillebeeckx considered becoming a Jesuit himself, but chose instead to join the Dominicans in 1934. Schillebeeckx began his studies in philosophy at Louvain under the mentorship of the Belgian Dominican Dominic De Petter, who emphasized that human knowing includes an experiential element that goes beyond conceptual formulations. Initially, Schillebeeckx had little interest in the theology he studied in Louvain in preparation for his 1941 ordination, since it was largely limited to an analysis of Thomistic texts that failed to situate Aquinas's insights in either their own historical context or the larger ongoing tradition of the church

All of that changed, however, when Schillebeeckx began his postgraduate theological studies in 1945 in Paris at the Sorbonne and Le Saulchoir, the Dominican faculty of theology. He credited Marie-Dominique Chenu, the Dominican medieval scholar who was also active in the worker-priest movement in Paris at the time, as having the greatest influence on his own theological work. From Chenu, Schillebeeckx learned the importance of reading texts in their historical context, of doing theology in dialogue with the social and political movements of the day, and of rooting theological claims in concrete activity on behalf of the Gospel. Schillebeeckx's later writings on tradition as a living history of experience and his lifelong ecumenical commitments also reflected the influence of French

Dominican Yves Congar, the ecclesialogist and ecumenist whose masterful classic *Tradition and Traditions* paved the way for the Second Vatican Council's renewed understanding of "tradition" as the historical process by which the church hands on the mystery of Christ as living and active in every age.

Schillebeeckx's writings were investigated at three different points in his career -- his views on Eucharist in 1968 (when Jesuit Fr. Karl Rahner served as his defender), his *Jesus* book in a process that extended from 1974 to 1980, and his writings on ordained ministry. None of those processes resulted in a condemnation or a silencing, although an official notification on the ministry book was issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1986.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, Schillebeeckx was most widely known in the English-speaking world for *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, which made a major contribution to the renewal of Catholic sacramental theology. Concerned that many Catholics viewed the sacraments as magical rituals that "bestowed grace," Schillebeeckx emphasized that grace is an interpersonal encounter -- a relationship of mutual friendship between God and human persons made possible in and through the Incarnation.

Recasting the traditional definition of sacraments as "an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace" in personal terms, Schillebeeckx emphasized that Jesus himself is the primary sacrament in whom God's gracious love became visible, tangible, historical and irrevocable.

A fifth gospel

In that early volume, Schillebeeckx likewise identified the church as a sacrament since its mission as the body of Christ in the world is to make visible the invisible love of God. He described the seven sacraments as visible signs of the church's encounter in faith with the risen Christ. In the decades after the Second Vatican Council, Schillebeeckx continued to speak of the positive role of the witness of the church in and through communities of baptized Christians who "write a fifthgospel with their lives." But he grew increasingly critical of the institutional church because of the failure of those in leadership to implement the renewal called for by the council, particularly in terms of the collegial exercise of authority and recognition of the diverse gifts given to all baptized Christians.

When interviewed in recent years about his memories of the Second Vatican Council, Schillebeeckx highlighted the importance of Pope John XXIII's opening address and his intervention in calling for a new draft of the document on revelation (*Dei Verbum*) as well as his intervention in appointing additional members who represented more diverse viewpoints to the commission preparing the conciliar documents.

Schillebeeckx identified the teaching of *Lumen Gentium* on the collegiality of bishops as the most important teaching of the council. At the same time, he remarked that the council's most negative moment, in his judgment, came in the week that many identified as the "black week" of the council (Nov. 16, 1964), when an official interpretation of the doctrine of

collegiality by “higher authorities” maintained that the pope could rule the church either alone or together with the world episcopacy. In Schillebeeckx’s judgment, that interpretation not only opposed the thinking of the majority at the council, but also contributed to the perpetuation of a “monarchical papal regimen” rather than the exercise of the Petrine ministry *within* the college of bishops, as well as to the lack of reform of the Roman curia, which often blocked the proper exercise of authority by the bishops throughout the world.

The central theological question of how to speak of God and salvation in a secularized and suffering world was a primary focus in Schillebeeckx’s writings since the mid-1960s. A lecture tour in the United States during the height of the death-of-God movement and discussions with university chaplains in France confirmed Schillebeeckx’s own concerns about challenges to the very possibility of Christian faith, especially among intellectuals and the young in the secularized and developed countries of the Western Hemisphere. Responding to those concerns in a series of lectures that he delivered in the United States (published in *God the Future of Man*), Schillebeeckx affirmed the dominant cultural conviction that human history was the responsibility of human beings and that God is not a *deus ex machina* who intervenes in the events of human history. Schillebeeckx argued that the Christian interpretation of the biblical “God of promise” was not a “God of the gaps” but rather a loving Creator who empowers and trusts creation, but who does not violate creation’s autonomy or the freedom of human persons. In the face of the apparent absence of God, Schillebeeckx maintained that God’s creative and saving active presence (grace) sustains and empowers human efforts

on behalf of humankind and the Earth and holds open the future even for those whose lives appear to have been destroyed by sinful humanity or the destructive forces of nature.

Hope for a different future

Schillebeeckx's contact with liberation theologians, especially the Peruvian theologian Dominican Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, and his growing awareness of the radical suffering around the world led to an increasing emphasis in his writings on what he referred to as "negative contrast experience" as the starting point for most people's encounter with God. Rather than identifying experiences of radical and dehumanizing suffering and injustice as "fate" or "God's will," Schillebeeckx remarked that in those situations people rightly call out in protest: "This should not be." From a theological perspective, he identified God's Spirit at work in the powers of endurance, resistance, and the hope for a different future for those who are the victims of injustice and sin, and in the solidarity and action of all those who stand in accompaniment with them and who attempt to change the social and political structures that perpetuate that suffering.

The context of radical secularization and global radical suffering led Schillebeeckx to undertake the project for which he was most widely known in the final decades of his life -- a retelling of the story of Jesus as "salvation coming from God." Arguing that God has not given Christians a theoretical answer to the problem of evil, but rather a personal response in the life story of Jesus, Schillebeeckx proceeded to retell that story in a way that he hoped would move others to "go and do likewise." Rather than promoting the notion that

God sent Jesus to suffer and die “for our salvation,” Schillebeeckx insisted that the central theme of Jesus’s life is echoed in the Gospel of John: “I came that you might have life and have it in abundance.” It was human sin, rather than the divine will, that led to execution of Jesus. Hence Schillebeeckx wrote provocatively that “in one sense, we are saved despite the death of Jesus.”

Schillebeeckx’s theology of the Resurrection has been criticized as overly subjective because of his emphasis on the Easter experience of the disciples, which he interpreted as a conversion experience (of forgiveness and renewed mission). Schillebeeckx responded that his focus in the *Jesus* book had been to trace the faith journey of the first disciples and that it was only through the mediation of their faith experience and testimony that later believers have access to the mystery of the Resurrection. In an early revision of his Jesus book, he emphasized that the disciples’ experience was possible only because of what happened first to Jesus himself -- his “personal-cum-bodily resurrection from the dead” and his ongoing life at the right hand of the Father.

Preaching on that same mystery at a later point, Schillebeeckx admitted that he found it most difficult to speak about what Christians mean by “resurrection of the body” not because he had any doubts about it, but because it is ultimately a matter of speaking of the very mystery of God and God’s faithfulness in the face of the greatest challenges to that faith -- sin and death.

As he approached his own death, Schillebeeckx continued to work on a final book on the sacraments. Coming full circle in his theological interests, he remarked that all of human life –

and especially encounters with the poor and the marginalized -- provide the opportunity for encounter with God.

The final expression of his trust in the living God was a prayer he wrote on a notepad near his bed in his final days: "Loving, gracious God, it is you who lay me in my grave. (Edward)"

[Mary Catherine Hilkert is professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana.]

Courtesy: *National Catholic Reporter*

Mother Teresa of Pakistan

The government of Pakistan has posthumously awarded a Catholic nun the Sitara-e-Imtiaz, its highest civilian honour, for her services to humanity and to Pakistan. Sr.Ruth Lewis, 77, known as the Mother Teresa of Pakistan, was a cofounder in 1969 of the Dar-UI-Sukun house (House of Peace) in Karachi for mentally and physically disabled.

(*Tablet*, 1 Aug.2020)

CARING ABOUT PEOPLE

by
Voice of the Voiceless

“I read that when Nelson Mandela became President of South Africa he went for a stroll in the city one day with his close protection unit and expressed his desire to eat in one of their downtown restaurants. So, they did as Mandela wanted, went to a restaurant and ordered food. While they were eating, Mandela noticed a man sitting in front of their table waiting for food and he asked one of his soldiers to go and ask that person to join them with his food. Apparently, the man got up and joined them and sat by Mandela’s side. However, they noticed his hands were trembling constantly and he waited until everyone had finished their food and left. One of Mandela’s soldiers remarked that apparently the man was quite sick as his hands trembled so much. Mandela said, “No, not at all, this man was the Guard of the prison where I was jailed. Often, after the torture I was subjected to, I used to scream and ask for a little water and this very same man used to come every time and urinate on my head. Now that I am President of the State of South Africa, he probably expected me to retaliate in the same way by torturing him or imprisoning him; that is why he was trembling, but that is not in my character nor part of my ethics.

This is also when **Nelson** Mandela declared: “The Mentality of Retaliation destroys States, while the Mentality of Tolerance builds Nations.” He continued saying, “The Weak can Never Forgive, and Forgiveness is the attribute of the Strong.” These are the gems of wisdom that this awesome human being tried desperately to inculcate in humanity.

Courtesy: *Daily Mirror*, July 16, 2020

UCHCHAMUNE ISLAND ITS BEAUTY AND LAMENTS

Beauty

There are fourteen beautiful islands off Kalpitiya. Uchchamune is one of them, with its own beauty. It is surrounded by the lagoon on one side, and by the sea on the other. The people who live here in the island of Uchchamune are a fishing community. The lagoon, the sea, and the beaches look gorgeous and these are precious gifts from God to the fishing community.

Difficult life

The lagoon and the sea are considered treasures for their life by the people as they totally depend on them for their livelihood. There is a sandy track that connects the island with the mainland. Since the sandy track is not properly done, the mode of travelling for the islanders and visitors are by boats. The fisher-families like to remain in Uchchamune mainly because of their livelihood. Every day they risk their lives to go into the sea and lagoon in order to make a catch of fish for sale and earn money for their living. They are in a continual struggle to have the basic needs of life. When the sea gets rough the waves cover the boats and sailing becomes terribly dangerous. It seems somewhat like walking on a knife's edge. The slightest mistake could result in a tragedy.

The island with its people portrays a beautiful picture but the reality is different. Though one may glorify the fascinating

nature and the enchanting surroundings, one discovers the reality by being with them. Someone who views only through his/her naked eye may say how admirably the fisher-folk lead their lives in joy and simple life style. But to someone who tries to see things beyond his/her naked eye, the brokenness, the wounds and the pains of these people become visible, and s/he will begin to feel that pain. The truth is that the fishing community in the island of Uchchamune is in a desperate situation.

Thirst for Education

Literacy level plays an important role in the social, economic, and human development of a nation or of a race. The literacy rate of the islanders is very low. Compared with the rest of the country, their level of development is below that of the people in rest of the country. This has been prevailing for a long time in the island. Poor literacy rate of the people indicates the lack of education as well as the insufficient educational facilities provided to the island. This fact keeps them frozen and inactive for learning for a long time. The inferiority complex that is clearly seen among them is also a result of their indifference to educate themselves. This complex situation has made them dependent on others always. Initiatives emerging from them are very few, and in a crisis situation they do not know to whom to go or whom to consult.

Lack of Inspiration

Since there are no models around them to imitate in the field

of education, and with the poor education that they receive, they identify themselves only as 'illiterate fishermen'. They do not envisage any other identification for them; even the children do not have any ambition. They have accepted fishing as the only means of earning money. It is so unfortunate that there is no one among them to think otherwise. By birth the vocation of a male in the island of Uchchamune is to become a fisherman and of a female is just to be a housewife. This kind of culture is transmitted from generation to generation. Such a disposition naturally kills the innate talents of the youth and children. A mysterious germ has crept into their minds that make them to think that education is worthless and useless. Since they have such preoccupied ideas about their future, their readiness to face their future is not very noticeable. Let me state my own experience in this regard. One day when I was having a casual chat with a father of a child, he happened to say, "Sir, see the lagoon and the sea; they offer many job opportunities. We do not need white collar jobs; the sea and the lagoon give us enough and more. Even the education our children receive from grades 1 to 5 is too much for them. Sir, I have performed my responsibility; they have three boats, nets, and all the instruments and equipment they need for fishing."

School itself laments

The one and only school in the island of Uchchamune is approved only up to grade 06. Even these classes are not properly organized and not up to required standards. After grade six some children follow the classes up to grade

However there are children who would repeat this grade 8 class for three years. Many children stop their schooling just after finishing grade five, and a few proceed till grade 8. That is the end of their education. Whether at least during this time the children get a proper education is a very relevant question to be asked. The things that I have observed at the school are the following:

- Absence of a proper time table
- No proper time to begin or to end the school
- Lack of awareness of the children with regard to the subjects that they have to study
- Lack of teachers to teach the subjects, e.g music, dancing, health science, religion, science etc.
- Lack of sports (extracurricular activities)
- Lack of a place to have a decent meal
- Teachers are not regular

These are few areas that require remedies and immediate rectifications in the near future in order to improve the tragic state of affairs in the Uchchamune school. After finishing their studies at grade 8, the boys join their fathers or relatives to go for fishing, and girls help their mothers at home or perform certain responsibilities entrusted to them such as making dry fish, mending nets, cleaning the nets, cooking, animal farming etc.

Emerging of the urges

When the children reach the age of 15 or 16, in order overcome their loneliness, they get hold of someone in the

opposite sex and begin to live together without any idea about marriage, family life and their own sexuality. According to my understanding this is an unresolved problem among them. Family is the smallest and the very important community in any society. It plays a vital role with regard to the human development. Without any basic knowledge about marriage and family life, even without having basic knowledge about their own sexuality, they enter into relationships just to satisfy their urgings as a sexual being. Since they have got used to a 'living together culture' before they arrive at the proper age to marry, they lose also the opportunity of participating in PRE-CANA and POST-CANA seminars which are organized by the Catholic Church.. In this situation, how can we expect the families to be aware about their rights and responsibilities?

Family Woes

These young couples who are deprived of their physical and psychological needs in their childhood are wounded and these wounds are ignored by the society, with the result the subsequent generations become more wounded than the previous ones. Generation to generation they will give birth to wounded societies. An unborn child is affected even by the mental condition of the mother. If the pregnant mother is sorrowful or gets ill-treated by her husband or by any other person, not only the mother but also the unborn child will be affected. This is a psychological fact. There are more problems in the families in Uchchamune which affect their lives. For example, the suspicion between couples and the quarrels due to drunkenness. Hence, even before one's birth

the person is psychologically affected. Food items for human growth such as vitamins, and the other necessary things are far from their reach. For instance, the folic acid - a man-made form of B vitamin called folate – plays an important role in the production of red blood cells, and helps also the development of a baby's neural tube connected to brain and spinal cord. Folate is found naturally in dark green vegetables and citrus fruits. The people in Uchchamune island do not get folate even naturally since their consumption of vegetables is very less. The deprivation of this so called 'folate' could develop health problems when the neural tube defects emerge such as - *Spina bifida*: incomplete development of the spinal cord or the vertebrae; *Anencephaly*: incomplete development of major parts of the brain. This folic acid deficiency would be one of the reasons for poor development of the brain and for the poor performances.

Hidden misdemeanor

Marriage between blood relations is another reason for the defects that are present in the children. The researches indicate that the risk of having childbirth defects, and certain hereditary diseases increase if parents are close relatives. The conditions inherited due to kinship are often serious. Such conditions include metabolic diseases, blood diseases, and physical and mental development problems.

I do not say these are the root causes for all the physical and mental defects in them, but these are two main causes among many. The people are ignorant and they really don't know

what they are doing. They do not know the outcome of what they are doing. How can we expect them to be well-aware of these health issues when they are deprived of a teacher of health science at school? They are not culpable of their ignorance because their right to education is not met.

After birth, the children are deprived of physical needs (like food, shelter, clothes etc.), and psychological needs such as love, affection, acceptance etc. Evidently, these issues can cause great harm to the children. At any moment these wounds can appear and pave the way to worsen the situations. Immediate attention to these situations can help eradicate the gravity of the situation.

Active presence of World Vision Lanka

The active presence of the agency, the **World Vision Lanka**, is a great help and support to the people to uphold their life standard. As a Christian relief organization they have engaged themselves in different spheres of the people in Uchchamune. In order to enhance the people financially they have provided them with boats, boats engines, goats for animal farming, traditional boats (Theppam), and proper places for dry fish production (Pappu). It has been a great help for them to come up from their grass-root levels and to stand on their own feet. People in Uchchamune have suffered for many years due to lack of drinking water. Now each family has been given help to have their own well. This is one of the remarkable projects that the agency has done in Uchchamune. Thanks to them,

now the people have access to drinking water. The agency also has intervened to give each family a Solar Panel with the help of another company. People, specially school-going children, are much benefiting by it.

The Roman Catholic Tamil School in the island of Uchchamune has been very much helped by the World Vision. This is an enormous investment that they done to the village. Voluntarily they have taken the responsibility to enhance the education of the children. In numerous ways they have helped the school. For instance, they have built three class rooms, renovated the nursery school, and trained two nursery school teachers from the village itself.

In order to improve the literacy rate World Vision has introduced a program called 'Reading Club'. It is a very systematic and appropriate program to improve the literacy rate of the children. Since I got a chance to engage in this program, I realized the relevance of it, and observed the enthusiasm of the children to participate in this program. This is not an isolated program of studies but very enjoyable program consisting of various activities. If it is conducted well then it will surely produce very positive results in the long run.

Another important thing the **World Vision** does is drawing the attention of the private and the government sectors, in order to uphold the living conditions of the people in Uchchamune. Their mediation plays a vital role to eradicate

the basic problems which the people face in their hustle bustle life.

Lost Cause of Catholic Social Teaching

As a religious I felt was the importance of integrating Catholic social teaching to priestly and religious formation. The need is greatly felt in the context of Uchchamune where we, the Oblate Scholastics, lived for some time. Looking back at the spirituality which has molded the attitudes of the priests and religious during their formative years, it is observable that it is inadequate to embrace social dimensions. Such a spirituality might have left many priests and religious with the conviction that the relationship with God is first and foremost a personal or private affair. We feel that our spirituality must have also a powerful social dimension.

The words of St. Augustine, 'Too late have I known thee', can be fittingly applied to many priests and religious when it comes to the Catholic social teaching. It is said that the best kept secret in the Church is the social teaching of the Church. For some, it is just another subject that is taught in the seminaries to make the candidates capable of proving their theoretical knowledge about social doctrine at their examinations. It does not give them much space to put that knowledge into practice. It may resemble a broiler chicken farm where the chickens are fed by the food which they grow quickly to meet their ultimate end. Though the candidates are formed well academically and in the other areas that are necessary for the priestly and religious formation, most of the

-time they are not prepared enough to face the social realities, and they are not aware of the struggles people face in their hustle and bustle way of life. Some of the priests and religious tend to think their duty is only to celebrate the Holy Mass and administer the sacraments to the people. In a situation like this how can they become relevant to the future? How can they be relevant in interpreting the Gospel to newly created issues in the world? Only a crucified Church can preach the crucified Christ.

Distorted View

It is clear that the Catholic social teaching has been overlooked, even neglected, in the formation process. It is my belief that the Catholic social doctrine need to be integrated in the formation of priests and religious in a more solid and efficacious way. The **AIT** (Asian institute of Theology) programme conducted by the Oblate Province of Colombo is a solid and efficacious way to integrate the Catholic social teaching into the formation process of the religious. The time period that we spend in Uchchamune provided us a hand-full of experiences of the actual reality of the people and to integrate the Catholic social teaching into our lives.

Bro. Tharanga Namal Perera OMI

Courtesy: *SINT UNUM*, Oblate Scholasticate, Kandy.

**Fr. LOUIS PONNIAH, OMI,
the most senior Oblate in Sri Lanka**

by Fr. Emmanuel Fernando, OMI

I met Fr. Louis Ponniah, OMI for the first time in 1962 at the Oblate Scholasticate, Ampitiya, when I was in the years of formation for priesthood. That year, on his return from Rome where he underwent Oblate formation for seven years while studying at the Gregorian University and being ordained a priest on July 12, 1961, he had been appointed by the Oblate Provincial, the late Fr. Alexis Serru, to be a formator and the bursar of the Oblate Scholasticate, Ampitiya and with a teaching assignment at the National Seminary as well (1965-1968). At the Oblate Scholasticate, he was also the Moderator of the Oblate Study Club of which I was one of the secretaries. It was at that time the Oblate Study Club began editing and publishing of the *Missionary Oblate* journal in typed and cyclostyled form, which is now published by the Oblate Province of Colombo. (Commenting on the publication of the *Missionary Oblate* journal recently, Fr. Louis noted, “It (the journal) has attained perfect maturity and the contents are very prophetic; and this is, as it should be in a Missionary magazine”).

Lecturer and formator at Ampitiya

Fr. Louis Ponniah was with us at the Oblate Scholasticate community, while the 2nd Vatican Council was in session in Rome. Hence, he did not have the opportunity to

listen to the Oblate bishops who had come to Rome from different parts of the world to participate in the Council and were residing in the Oblate General House. Fr. Louis also missed the opportunity of listening to famous theologians who had converged in Rome as “periti” (experts) to assist the bishops in matters biblical, theological and socio-pastoral during the Council sessions.

Though Fr. Louis Ponniah, OMI was not exposed to the Council environment in Rome, and was not affected by the “aggiornamento” (updating) of the Council, he had been exposed to the thinking of Pope Pius XI who preceded the Council and who had been a very learned and saintly Pope. Fr. Louis was familiar with Pius XI’s Encyclicals, *Mystici Corporis* (Church as the Body of Christ), *Mediator Dei* (on Liturgy), *Humani Generis* (Theological issues) and the famous Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* which opened the door for biblical research in the Catholic Church. As an Oblate candidate studying and undergoing Oblate formation in Rome, Fr. Louis Ponniah was influenced also by Fr. Leo Deschâtelets, the Oblate Superior General who was an inspiring leader of the Oblate Congregation at that time.

At the Oblate Scholasticate, Ampitiya, Fr. Louis was noted for his observance and practice of the Oblate way of life. He was a very prayerful and a very dedicated Religious. Constancy and regularity were very transparent in his personality. He was also a disciplinarian. As the bursar of the Oblate Scholasticate community, he inculcated the spirit of

the religious life by leading a very simple and frugal life. In fact, if and when each Oblate Scholastic needed what was necessary, he would readily grant them after the Scholastics had obtained the due approval from the Superior. As Moderator of the Oblate Study Club, he helped the scholastic brothers to gain knowledge about the history of the Oblate Congregation and to be imbued by the religious life and the missionary zeal of the great Oblate Missionaries who have worked in Sri Lanka.

Pastoral ministries

Having served the candidates for priesthood as a lecturer and formator at Ampitiya for six years (1962-1968), Fr. Louis Ponniah began his pastoral ministries in the parishes in Mannar and in Vavuniya for six years (1969-1974), acting also as Oblate District Superior. While being the Vicar Provincial in Jaffna (1974-1977), he served also as the Parish priest at Pandianthalvu, Jaffna. In his pastoral ministries, he had been a great lover of the people and an energetic preacher.

Having served the People of God in the parishes in Mannar and in Jaffna, Fr. Louis Ponniah was sent as a missionary to Malaysia (1978-1982). In 1981 when I was there attending a meeting, I had the opportunity of experiencing his Oblate hospitality. Having served the Catholics, especially the Tamil-speaking Catholics in Malaysia, on his return to Sri Lanka, he was appointed as the parish priest of Thalvupadu and Pallimunai (1983-1984).

Major Superior

Fr. Louis Ponniah became the first Oblate Major Superior of the General Delegation of the Oblates of Jaffna in 1985 and in 1988 the first Oblate Provincial Superior of the Oblate Province of Jaffna (1988-1991). In 1986, he also attended the Oblate General Chapter together with Fr. Anselm Silva, the Provincial of the Oblate Province of Colombo and the two delegates, Fr. Dalston Forbes, OMI and I. It was the time of the ethnic war in Sri Lanka and Fr. Louis had to pray, discern and act as a Religious leader. As a Major Superior, he was a man of undaunted courage and foresight and is known to have acted always preserving and promoting the identity and mission of the Oblates in the Oblate Province of Jaffna.

While participating in the General Chapter of 1986 in Rome, Fr. Louis and the participants of the General Chapter came to know of the sudden death of Fr. Louis' eldest brother¹ in England, while returning home from Gambia for his vacation. Realising that Fr. Louis preferred to continue participating in the General Chapter, they and Fr. Superior General had to persuade him to proceed to U.K which he did.

After relinquishing his duties as Oblate Provincial, Fr. Louis cared for the retired Oblates at Amala Utpavam, Columbuturai, as the Superior and the Bursar (1991 -1994).

Lecturer and Spiritual Director

While Fr.Louis Ponniah was taking care of the retired Oblates

at Amala Utpavam, he became also a visiting lecturer at the Major Seminary, Columbuturai (1991-1997). From 1998 to this day, he has become a resident lecturer and Spiritual Director at the Major Seminary. At present he teaches four subjects in the Philosophy Department: *Introduction to Philosophy, History of Medieval Philosophy, Metaphysics and Anthropology*. Earlier, he had taught also Spiritual Theology in the Theology Department at the Major Seminary.

Journeying / Adventuring for Christ

Fr. Louis Ponniah is not a sedentary Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate. He is one who dares to reach out to the unreached in order to proclaim Jesus and His message and guide the people of God. During the Major Holidays at the Major Seminary, Fr. Louis goes to a couple of parishes to preach ten-day retreats. *Peregrinatio pro Christo (Adventuring for Christ)*.

Ninety years old Oblate Fr. Louis Ponniah, who is a formator and a spiritual director at St. Francis Xavier's Seminary, Columbuturai, Jaffna, continues to cycle. At present (2020), he is the most senior Oblate Missionary in Sri Lanka.

May God, our Maternal Father, continue to bless him.
Ad multos annos vivat.

Fr. Louis Ponniah was born on August 22, 1930 in Malaya (Malaysia). He had studied also at St. Patrick's

College, Jaffna (1949-1952). He pronounced his first religious vows as an Oblate on August 15, 1955 at Mont Eden, Kalutara. He was ordained a priest in Rome on July 12, 1961.

“When man ceases to worship God, he does not worship nothing, but worships everything.”

– G.K. Chesterton

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¹ Fr. Louis Ponniah’s eldest brother , Stephen Ponniah, who died suddenly in U.K in 1985 while returning home for his vacation from Gambia, had been appointed by International Monetary Fund (I.M.F) as Adviser to the Central Bank in Gambia in 1983 after his retirement from the Central Bank in Colombo where he was the Director of Bank Supervision. The Governor and some members of the staff from Gambia were present in Colombo for the funeral.

Mindfulness based Stress Reduction

1. Physiological parameters:

In a physiologically healthy being; blood pressure is 120/80 mm Hg; fasting blood glucose falls in the range of 90 mg/dL – 100 mg/dL, two hour post prandial is lower than 160 mg/dL; total blood cholesterol is below 200 mg/dL, LDL is lower than 100mg/dL, HDL is above 60 mg/dL & triglycerides is below 150 mg/dL; and Body Mass Index falls in the range of 18.5 Kg/m² – 24.9 Kg/m² .

When blood pressure exceeds 140/90 mm Hg; fasting blood glucose exceeds 126 mg/dL, two hour post prandial exceeds 160 mg/L; total blood cholesterol exceeds 240 mg/dL, LDL exceeds 130 mg/dL, HDL falls below 40 mg/dL & triglycerides exceeds 200 mg/dL and Body Mass Index exceeds 25 Kg/m²; it is considered as high.

2. Risk factors:

Risk factors for the physiological parameters that make them high are of non-modifiable and modifiable nature. The modifiable nature risk factors are behavioral risk factors, mental stress cum spiritual ignorance etc.

- 3. Mental stress cum spiritual ignorance can be suppressed and eradicated with prayers, meditation, yoga, tai chi etc.**

Behavioral risk factors are unhealthy diet, lack of exercise, taking alcohol and smoking.

සිහිය පිහිටුවීම තුළින් ආතතිය අඩු කිරීම

1. භෞතික පරාමිතීන්:

හිරෝහි සිරුරැති පුද්ගලයෙකුගේ; රුධිර පීඩනය 120/80 mm Hg; හිරාහාරව සිට මහින් රුධිර ග්ලූකෝස් 90 mg/dL – 100 mg/dL පරාසයේ, ආහාර ගෙන පැය දෙකකට පසු මහින් රුධිර ග්ලූකෝස් 160 mg/dLට අඩුයි; සම්පූර්ණ රුධිර කොලෙස්ටරෝල් 200 mg/dLට අඩුයි, LDL 100mg/dLට අඩුයි, HDL 60 mg/dLට අඩුයි හා ට්‍රයිග්ලිසරයිඩ්ස් 150 mg/dLට අඩුයි සහ; BMI අගය 18.5 Kg/m² – 24.9 Kg/m² පරාසයේ.

රුධිර පීඩනය 140/90 mm Hg ඉක්ම වූ විට; හිරාහාර සිට මහින් රුධිර ග්ලූකෝස් 126 mg/dL ඉක්ම වූ විට, ආහාර ගැනීමෙන් පැය දෙකකට පසු මහින් රුධිර ග්ලූකෝස් 160 mg/L ඉක්ම වූ විට; සම්පූර්ණ රුධිර කොලෙස්ටරෝල් 240 mg/dL ඉක්ම වූ විට, LDL 130 mg/dL ඉක්ම වූ විට, HDL 40 mg/dLට වඩා අඩු වූ විට හා ට්‍රයිග්ලිසරයිඩ්ස් 200 mg/dL ඉක්ම වූ විට සහ; BMI අගය 25 Kg/m² ඉක්ම වූ විට; අධික යැයි සැලකේ.

2. අවදානම් සාධක

භෞතික පරාමිතීන් තිබිය යුතු පරාසයෙන් ඉක්මවන්නට වෙනස් කළ නොහැකි සහ වෙනස් කළ හැකි අවදානම් සාධක හේතුකාරක වේ. වෙනස් කළ හැකි අවදානම් සාධක නම් වර්ගා ධර්ම සහ මානසික ආතතිය හා ආධ්‍යාත්මික අවිද්‍යාව ආදියයි.

3. මානසික ආතතිය හා ආධ්‍යාත්මික අවිද්‍යාවය සජීකායනා, භාවනා, යෝග, තායි චි ආදියෙන් අඩු කළ හැකිය.

4. වර්ගා ධර්ම අවදානම් සාධක නම් සෞඛ්‍ය සම්පන්න නොවන ආහාර , ව්‍යායාම මදිකම, මත්ද්‍රව්‍ය පානය සහ දුම්බීමයි.

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ANGER OVER VATICAN'S PLANS FOR PARISHES

THE VATICAN document on the future of the parish released last week by the Congregation for the Clergy has ignited a furore in the Church in Germany.

While the bishops' conference itself has remained silent, many members have reacted with anger. Only Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki of Cologne has defended it, with Cardinal Walter Kasper steering a middle way.

Titled "The pastoral conversion of the parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church", the Holy See's Instruction was published on July 20. Although the first part of it emphasised the joint responsibility of the whole People of God" and of the parish community for missionary pastoral work, the later part underlined that the parish priest had responsibility for the whole parish.

Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Munich, former president of the bishops' conference, was one of the document's most outspoken critics, saying: "That is not a fruitful way forward. You cannot have one authority announcing something, which all the others have to obey. We must listen to one another, learn together and take up the experiences of the local Church – all of which I miss in the Vatican document."

Speaking in the Liebfrauentom (Munich cathedral), last week, Cardinal Marx said: "It's as if we in Germany had never thought about a missionary Church!"

Cardinal Woelki was almost a lone voice in defending the

document, telling katholisch.de: “It reminds us of the basic values of our faith, which, especially in Germany, we sometimes lose sight of when we are too occupied with ourselves. Let us – as the Church – dare to be what we are: Ecclesia, the called-out, the Body of Christ, the People of God, the royal priesthood!”

However according to Bishop Franz-Josef Bode of Osnabrück, vice-president of the bishops’ conference, the Vatican Instruction was a “return to clericalism”. He said the document had taken the German bishops completely by surprise. It “puts such a strong brake on the motivation and esteem of lay commitment that I am really worried how, under such circumstances, we will find new, committed Christians”.

Archbishop Ludwig Schick of Bamberg said it would have been better not to publish the Vatican Instruction, as it had done the Church and its missionary mandate “more harm than good”. The document was “unacceptable for a canon lawyer”, said Schick, who is a canon lawyer. It was “theologically deficient, vague and imprecise”.

The Instruction had not been quite such a surprise for his diocese, said Bishop Stephan Ackermann of Trier, as he had recently been summoned to the Vatican to discuss his parish clustering plans, which Rome had rejected. What he found “particularly irritating” was that while it highlighted the role of the parish priest, the document said nothing about clerical sexual abuse.

Cardinal Walter Kasper, former President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity and a close ally

to Pope Francis, praised the early sections, on the joint responsibility of the whole People of God, and said the German bishops had concentrated too much on the passages regarding the role of the priest.

Nevertheless, committed lay Catholics, especially women “without whose service most of our parishes would have broken down” deserved an “express word of thanks, encouragement and recognition”, he said.

Courtesy: *Tablet*, 1 August 2020

"God creates out of nothing – wonderful you say. Yes, to be sure, but He does what is still more wonderful- He makes saints out of sinners"

= Soren Kierkegaard

TO SAVE OUR FUTURE GENERATIONS

“To save future generation from poisonous food and adulterated water and put an end to the spread of non-communicable diseases such as Chronic Kidney disease, Cardio Vascular Diseases, Diabetes and Respiratory ailments which are known to be a direct result of the excessive use of chemical fertilizer, pesticide and weedicide for several generations.....

Why are farmers protesting and demanding extremely harmful chemical fertilizer at Rd 3.50/= a bag disregarding the harm caused to the soil, water and to themselves? It is because they have no financial means to purchase better and harmless fertilizer at a higher price.....

How many farmers have mortgaged their paddy fields or leased them out to mudalalis to meet day to day expenses. How many farmers are struggling to repay their loan installments on time.



“If we had an environment-friendly agricultural policy, our farmers would not have used harmful chemical fertilizer, pesticides and weedicides that have poisoned Sri Lanka’s soil, the water sources, our health and the flora and fauna.

Need to save our farmers, our environment, our soil and water from further poisoning by chemical fertilizer and pesticides to save our future generations.”

- *Daily Mirror*, 8. 3. 20115, p A 4.

