

# *The Missionary Oblate*



**The meeting at the Grand Ayatollah's humble home was the first in Vatican and Islamic histories between the leader of the Catholic Church and the highest ranking Shiite spiritual leader. (see page 61)**

# **The Missionary Oblate**

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**Editor: Emmanuel Fernando, OMI**

Address: Rajabima Oblate Centre, 519/16, Jayanthi Mawatha,  
Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka

Tel: (0094) 025-2222462; 077 235 9203;  
email: emma1938omi@gmail.com

Associate Editors: Anton Shivantha Wass, OMI  
and Surain Danushka Fernando, OMI

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## Contents

Editorial Forgiveness does not forbid demanding justice	5
<i>Lylie Fernando, Omi</i> Befriending the unknown	7
Caritas appeals to G 7	10
<i>Aloysius Pieris, sj</i> Baptism of All Nations (Mt 28:19-20) in the light of the Judgment of All Nations (Mt 25:31-46)	11
<i>Merl Mendis, OMI</i> Journeying with the Church	24
Shirley Lal Wijesinghe Genesis 22,1-19: Test of Abraham	37
<i>Emmanuel Fernando, OMI</i> Servants of the Kingdom of God	45
<i>Christopher Lamb and Christa Pongratz-Lippitt</i> Pope Francis revises Synodal Programme	48
<i>Emmanuel Fernando, OMI</i> Partners for God's Kingdom	51
<i>Chrishantha Jayalath, OMI</i> Identifying and resolving Loneliness in Priestly life	55
Ameen Izzadeen From Abraham's City of Ur, Pope calls for inter-faith Peace	61
<i>Cardinal Cardinal Michael Czerny, SJ</i> What the Pope, the Grand Iman of Cairo and the Official World say of Fraternity	66

<i>Maximus Fernando, OMI</i>	
Panegyric on Bishop Victor Gnanapragasam, OMI	70
The Church cannot bless same-sex unions	
Swiss bishop appoints lay people in episcopal vicar's place	76
A woman as an Undersecretary to the Synod of Bishops	78

Editorial :

## **Forgiveness does not forbid demanding justice**

At a time when individuals and groups in Sri Lanka are asking questions regarding forgiveness for the persons, who committed serious crimes on Easter Sunday on 21 April, 2019 and regarding justice, I prefer to find suitable response in Pope Francis' famous document "*Fratelli Tutti*" on fraternity and social friendship. He says "forgiveness and reconciliation are central themes in Christianity. Jesus never promoted violence or intolerance. He openly condemned the use of force to gain power over others" (no 238).

"The Church is well aware that in the course of history conflicts of interest between different social groups inevitably arise, and that in the face of such conflicts Christians must often take a position, honestly and decisively " (no 240). "Nor does this mean calling for forgiveness when it involves renouncing our own rights, confronting corrupt officials, criminals or those who would debase our dignity.

We are called to love everyone, without exception; at the same time, loving an oppressor does not mean allowing him to keep oppressing us, or letting him think that what he does is acceptable. On the contrary, true love for an oppressor means seeking ways to make him cease his oppression; it means stripping him of a power that he

does not know how to use, and that diminishes his own humanity and that of others”(no 241).

“Forgiveness does not entail allowing oppressors to keep trampling on their own dignity and that of others, or letting criminals continue their wrongdoing. Those who suffer injustice have to defend strenuously their own rights and those of their family; precisely because they must preserve the dignity they have received as a loving gift from God. If a criminal has harmed me or a loved one, no one can forbid me from demanding justice and ensuring that this person – or anyone else – will not harm me, or others, again. This is entirely just; forgiveness does not forbid it but actually demands it” (no 241).

Emmanuel Fernando, OMI

## **Regarding Kithu Dana Pubuduwa (KDP)**

“It was not the hierarchy but the KDP, by their collective obedience to the Spirit, that helped hundreds of laypersons to transform their lives radically as demanded by the Gospels. The hierarchy owes them a huge debt for multiplying domestic churches in which God’s Word was listened to, meditated upon and put into action. Therefore the Episcopate is called by Providence to fan the flames of renewal that the Spirit has kindled among the faithful through the Charismatic Movement rather than grieve the Spirit by quenching that fire through clerical domination.”(Aloysius Pieris, SJ, *We believe in the Holy Spirit*, Tulana Publication, Kelaniya, p3).

**‘Befriending the unknown’  
is an essential element of Christian  
Spirituality**

In the philosophical parlance, Aristotle defined human being as a rational animal. Rationality is a huge part of our make up as human persons. When rationality is not present, we tend to say that he has lost his reason. All human beings have an ingrained desire for certitude. Psychologists are of the opinion that our brains are wired for certainty. On the contrary, a sense of uncertainty generates a great deal of anxiety and stress. As our brains crave certainty, from our younger days we have been disciplined and trained to work for targets and deadlines. Moreover certainty rewards the brain with a feeling of satisfaction and fulfillment.

When we try to understand what is going on in the age of Covid 19, we realize that it is beyond our human comprehension. So far, science and religion has failed to offer us a long lasting solution. As the vaccination drive is in progress, it is crystal clear that when everyone is vaccinated only the world will be a safe place to live in. We have got to embrace ‘the new normal.’

It is common knowledge that Covid 19 has affected every aspect of our life. It has changed the way we think, the way we relate to people, the way we worship, work and study. Our life is characterized by Lockdown, travel

ban and restrictions. As we are passing through unprecedented times we are beginning to realize that we no longer are able to work according to our plans, expectations and deadlines. Cancellations, delays and postponement have become the order of the day. Hence there is a great deal of uncertainty looming up in the horizon. When our life is dominated by lockdown, delays and restrictions, it generates stress, anxiety and restlessness. Covid 19, the great teacher is awakening the rational human beings to slow down and to face life as it comes. ‘Give us our daily bread’ the petition of the Lord’s Prayer is offering us a new shade of meaning as we try to live every day. It is an invitation to live through every day trusting in God’s providence.

In the era of Covid 19, as we are trying to come to terms with what is going on in the world, Christian spirituality invites us to live with uncertainty and perceive it as an essential part of our spiritual growth.

Dealing with uncertainty and unexpectedness has been a fact of life in most of the biblical figures. For instance uncertainty is manifested in the story of Abraham when he was asked to leave his motherland and go to a country which he had never seen. Furthermore he was asked to sacrifice his own son. His total faith in God led to the brink of sacrificing his son. Thus he embraced the unknown. In the case of Moses, He was called by God, when he was tending the sheep of Jethro, his brother-in-



law. God took him out of his familiar surroundings and invited him to embark on a journey into the ‘unknown’. When we turn the pages of the New Testament, We find both Joseph and Mary were called upon to embrace the uncertainty after giving their resounding ‘yes’ to God. Their lives were replete with mystery and lack of clarity without a road map to navigate. They both trusted in God and journeyed with him.

As followers of Christ, as we go through these strange times, we are invited to embrace the unknown and trust in the Lord in every step we take. Moreover, Christianity does not consist of eliminating uncertainties but embracing the ‘unknown’. Spirituality is not looking for black and white answers but rather living in the gray. This is beautifully expressed in the Psalm no 23. ‘Even though I walk in the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me’. David articulates his fear of uncertainty, but he takes comfort in the Lord.

Lylie Fernando OMI

**David Neuhaus, a Jesuit priest born of Jewish parents speaks....”  
Livestreaming on social media could not substitute for the physical presence and material participation in the sacraments that is at the centre of Catholic life. Many felt orphaned from a church, paralysed by civil regulations that insist – wisely – on a shutdown to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus”** (*The Tablet*, April 2020)

## **Caritas appeals to G7 to cancel debt of poor countries**

It is impossible to “build back better” without cancelling the debt of poor countries and reinvesting these funds in Covid-19 response and recovery and to combat the climate crisis. This is the appeal that Caritas International makes to the Group of Seven rich nations of the world, or G7, who on Friday, June 11, 2021, began a 3-day meeting in the small village of Carbis Bay in Cornwall, UK.

Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States, who make up the G7, are the world’s wealthiest large democracies.

“Covid-19 put the rampant social injustices in today’s world under a magnifying glass. The only way to rebuild the future must be by eliminating such injustices,” says Aloysius John, secretary-general of Caritas Internationalis, the global confederation of some 165 national Catholic humanitarian and development agencies. “The G7 countries,” he says, “must lead the way in Covid-19 response and recovery to support those worst affected by the pandemic and support a just, green recovery.” “And the first step is to ensure that all debt payments are cancelled, including to private creditors. This is the quickest way of getting finance to where it is most needed,” Aloysius John says in his appeal.

-Vatican News

May the turbulence of Covid-19 pandemic  
become the birth pangs of a new creation.

**Baptism of All Nations (Mt 28:19-20)  
in the light of the  
Judgment of All Nations (Mt 25:31-46)**

**A SCRIPTURAL REFLECTION OFFERING  
A NEW MISSIOLOGY FOR ASIAN CHURCHES**

*Aloysius Pieris, s.j.*

A revised and updated version of an article first published in German in K. Kraemer & K. Vellguth (eds), *Christliches Zeugnis in einer multireligiösen Welt: Eine Einladung zum Dialog*, Herder, Freiburg, 2020, pp. 250-58.

**(I)**

**Baptism of “Promise”  
and Baptism of “Fulfillment”**

Jesus underwent two Baptisms during his life on earth; his followers are also summoned to pass through this ‘two-step process’. Hence we who have received the first Baptism (as an infant or as an adult) cannot claim full-fledged discipleship unless we take active part in his second Baptism. In the **first baptism** at the River Jordan his *mission was communicated to him*: “This is my Son.....” (Lk 3:21-22 & parallels); and *that mission was consummated* in his **second baptism**, which Jesus clearly identified with his passion and death on Mount Calvary (cf. Mk 10:38 and parallels; Lk 12:50) ----a passion and death sealed with resurrection.

The first was a Baptism of *water and the Holy Spirit*; the second was a baptism of fire, that is, one of *blood and Holy Spirit*. In the first Baptism the Spirit descended and rested on Jesus (Jn 1:32); in the second baptism it was Jesus who released his Spirit (Jn 19: 30b) to rest upon us his disciples (Jn 20:22).

This second baptism, the one of fire, should not be restricted to a mere acceptance of Jesus as one's savior; for something much more is demanded. For I cannot say 'I am saved' unless I *begin* to pass through the fire that the discipleship entails:- offering myself as a living sacrifice (Rom 12:1-2) in the service of others and thus "filling what is wanting in the suffering of Christ" (Col. 1:24). This second baptism, being a participation in the "victim-priesthood" of Christ, constitutes the sum and substance of what "spirituality" means in Christianity; for it coincides with *sequela Christi* or Christian "discipleship". Furthermore, in the first Baptism we all become **Co-Priests with Christ**; in the second baptism we become **Co-Victims with Christ** sacrificing ourselves for the love of others.

When one receives the first Baptism either as an infant or an adult, he or she is declared a "child of God" (as Jesus was at the river Jordan) and thus officially **receives the mission** to be a disciple of Christ. In other words one makes a *promise* (personally or through Godparents) to act as a child of God as Jesus did in obedience to the Father. But one **fulfills that mission** only when one begins to honour that baptismal *promise* of taking up one's cross and following Jesus, i.e. by

proclaiming the good news, living it out in one's life and paying the price for it ---in short, *when one exercises the discipleship* which one had promised to pursue at the first Baptism.

Note, however, that it is the second baptism that is demanded as the path to redemption; not the first. In fact when Benedict XVI instructed the Roman Catholics to abandon the long held hypothesis of an eternal limbo for unbaptized children, he supported the view that *unbaptized children are saved without the first Baptism*. The implication is that *salvation is possible outside the church* because the Father's creative love and the Son's redemptive love as well as the Spirit, who *is* that very love, is operative beyond the visible boundaries of the church; consequently, that the various sacraments which are self-expressions of the church cannot be an *absolute* requirement for salvation. For they are a *symbolic but effective means of sanctification that assist the already baptized persons to fulfill the mission of discipleship by courageously undergoing the second Baptism*. For in the praxis of the first Christians, *faith preceded baptism*; the first baptism was given only to those who accepted God-in-Jesus in Faith. That initial baptism, in other words, was not the source of one's faith but the confirmation of the faith one had already confessed ----faith which is deemed necessary for one's salvation; and salvation is associated with the second Baptism, namely, *living out that faith* by treading the path that Jesus trod.

The great illusion of seeking a comfortable Christianity (i.e., seeking to be a disciple of an uncrucified Messiah)

made Peter *rebuke Jesus for heading for the second baptism*, which was the supreme expression of that Love which alone saves. “Get behind me, [you my] adversary” was the Master’s counter-rebuke (Mt 16:23) as if to say, ‘do not block my path but come behind me and follow my footsteps as my disciple’. For “if anyone wants to be my disciple”, Jesus added immediately, he or she would have to “follow me” (*Ibid.*, 24) all the way to Calvary..... obviously to be baptized on the cross like the Master. That is why Paul defined authentic Baptism, not as a rite, but as dying and rising with Christ (Rom 6:1-4), that is, joining Jesus in his dangerous mission and thus becoming a priest-victim with him. *Such baptism alone constitutes as well as consummates discipleship.*

Let me state (as I clarify in the very next paragraph) that the **suffering and death** (physical or spiritual), which this second Baptism entails, **is neither the source nor the guarantee of salvation**. Suffering and death were the fruit of sin and, therefore, they cannot *per se* serve as the means of redemption. The First Letter of Peter clarifies the issue by speaking of two kinds of sufferings: *deserved suffering* (the consequence of our sins) and *undeserved suffering* (the consequence of our love); it is in the second kind of suffering that we “follow the example of Christ” (or exercise discipleship); for Christ suffered unjustly for the sake of justice, trusting in God who judges justly (I Pet 2: 19-23). This does not mean that ‘deserved suffering’ cannot be offered together with the undeserved suffering.

Let me therefore emphasize this much forgotten and

much ignored soteriological datum: **What guarantees salvation is Love, which invariably brings about suffering; not the suffering in itself which is invariably the cost of Love.** St Thomas' well-known dictum that what saved us was neither the suffering nor the death of Christ but his *obedientia et caritas* (i.e., Christ's love towards the Father and his love towards us) needs to be broadcast. Let us, therefore, note the clear difference that lies between the **purpose** for which the Father sent the Son ( i.e., to usher in a Reign of Love) and the **consequence** of fulfilling that purpose (namely, opposition leading to suffering and death). We do not love for the *purpose* of suffering ---that would be masochism; but we have often to undergo suffering as a *consequence* of our love. God does not impose suffering on us but only wants us to love *whatever be the suffering this love may cost us.* Such Love nails us to the cross and thus baptizes us into Christian discipleship.

Hence it is worth re-iterating that this second Baptism *is available also outside the church*; which means that **Christ makes disciples even of those who do not know Him provided they love others even at cost to themselves.** This is what we infer from Mathew 25:31-46; and that is the next step in our study.

## (II)

### **Making Disciples of [Gentile] Nations by Teaching Them to Love as Jesus Did**

According to the Mission Mandate given to us in Mathew 28: 19-20, we are sent to “(a) make *disciples of Nations*, (b) *baptizing them* [*autous* = persons of the

Nations or the “nationals”, i.e., the inhabitants of each country] (c) *teaching them [autous = persons of the Nations or the “nationals”] to obey all that I have commanded you*”. The phrase “all that I have commanded you” has been summed up by Jesus himself as the new commandment to “love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34;15:12,17), specially in the manner he expressed his love for us at his second Baptism, namely, by facing suffering and death. But this Matthean formulation of the Mission Mandate reveals its fuller sense (*sensus plenior*) only when illuminated by the same Mathew’s graphic description of the Last Judgment (25:31-46) where Jesus tells us *how* the persons constituting the *Nations* or the “nationals” of a gentile land could attain eternal salvation.

The term “nation” (*goy*) would seem, in general, to designate a politically and socially cohesive group of persons who have not [yet] explicitly recognized YHWH as their God or come to believe in Her. The non-Jews were also referred to as “gentiles” from *gentes*, Latin for “nations”. That is why the Jews at times claimed themselves to be a **People** (*'am* in Hebrew and *laos* in Greek) covenanted with YHWH, rather than a **Nation** of non-believers. It is true that sometimes the word “Nation” is employed to designate Israel, too, but it is often qualified with adjectives like “Great” (Gen.12:2; Dt 4:7), “holy” (Ex 19:6; I Peter 2:9) or a Nation whose God is the Lord, i.e., YHWH (Ps 33:12) etc.

Jesus Christ, the Eschatological Judge in the very act of passing his final judgment on the *Nations* (Mt 25:31-46),



indicates in no uncertain terms how the persons (*autous*) constituting the Nations can be saved or how they can be his disciples, even if they are not believers, namely, by becoming a Nation of *persons* who feed the **hungry** and quench the **thirsty**, comfort the **sick** and clothe the **naked**, shelter the **homeless** and are benign even to criminal elements that are in **prison** (as Jesus was to the murderous bandit on Calvary) and certainly seek *freedom for those chained unjustly*. In fact a nation whose members (persons) are so constituted as to see that all the basic necessities of life are provided for all is “the blessed of my Father” and is destined to “inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Mt 25:34). The persons of such *Nations* have obeyed his love-commandment, without ‘knowing’ who Christ is: “When did we see You hungry etc. ?” (vs. 37-39; 44). For in the hungry and the thirsty, the sick and the naked, in the homeless and the chained, they encounter the Saviour: *you gentiles (the persons constituting a nation) did it to Me; there for inherit my Father’s Kingdom*.

The proffering of “earthly” and “material” assistance *due by justice* to the needy as a condition for one’s “spiritual” advancement enters the very definition of Christian soteriology, according to which the ‘mundane’ is the locus in which one meets God’s ‘Me’. For such tangible acts are required by “love” (*hesed*) and “justice” (*sedaqah*), which are among the four divine attributes. What saves is Love which, in God, coincides with Justice, unlike in the West’s scholastic theology wherein, under Aristotelian influence, justice is reckoned as a

“human” (cardinal) virtue in contrast with Faith, Hope and Love which are “theological” virtues. In God justice coincides with love. Since God is Love Itself (1 Jn 4:8), it follows that Love is eternal (I Cor 13:8) and is greater than faith (I Cor 13:2c), because faith, unlike love, can never be predicated of God. Hence gentiles or members of all *Nations*, which have no explicit ‘knowledge’ of God in Christ, can nevertheless be saved by expressing their ‘love’ through the six forms of service rendered to the six categories of the needy in whom it is Christ who is loved and served. It is Love (*agape*) that is salvific, not knowledge (*gnosis*). For justice and love which coincide in God are experienced and expressed inseparably in such acts. Hence the Mission Mandate requires that we Asian disciples of Christ collaborate with men and women of the non-believing nations in attaining their discipleship through the exercise of the love-commandment. Thus can we “make disciples of the [members of ] nations” as mandated by Christ.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus shows that the Levite and the Priest who claimed to be very “spiritual people” serving in the temple (the place of ‘worship’) and claiming to believe in YHWH, **failed to love** whereas the apostate Samaritan (a non-believer) could *inherit eternal life*, because he **exercised neighbourly love** to a stranger in utter distress (Lk. 10:29-37). This is a **central teaching of the Scriptures**, e.g., Is. 1:11-17; Jer 7:1-15; Amos 5:21-24, where the prophets severely condemn the so-called ‘spiritual’ people who claim to indulge in divine **worship** (*abd*) but neglect human **service** (*abd*) towards the ‘materially’ deprived humans.

*Abodah* is both service and worship. The aforementioned “spiritual” persons seek to worship a divine presence outside the lives of the oppressed ones who constitute God’s Temple in which Jesus meets us in person; for Jesus himself refers to the needy persons as his own “Me”, i.e., his very Person :- “for what you do to the least of *My* brothers and sisters, you do unto *Me* (Mt 25:40). When a fundamentalist Christian charged Mother St Teresa of bringing mere material comforts rather than Christ to the destitute Hindus, her answer reportedly was: ‘these destitute Hindus are the Christ whom I serve’. Let us Christians, even as a minority in Asia, collaborate with those Nations and their Governments that make genuine efforts to uplift the downtrodden by implementing just economic policies and let us also work towards a healthy socio-political transformation where there is a violation of justice.

### (III) Baptism and Discipleship of *Our* Nation ?

Most nations in Asia are hosts to Christian minorities. Let me take my country as an example. Sri Lanka is 94% non-Christian and therefore this Nation will have to introduce many politically risky changes and revolutionary legislations (the baptism of the cross that some politicians fear to bear) before it could be a disciple by providing ***the six basic material needs of human beings: food and drink*** (for the hungry and the thirsty), ***relief and clothes*** (for the sick and the naked), ***homes and comfort*** (for the displaced and the imprisoned). For these works of mercy are a fulfillment

of the salvific covenant which consists of the love-commandment; wherefore the Lord has declared in the Scriptures that it is obedience to this commandment that guaranties a *people without a needy class* (Dt. 15:4). Working towards this ideal of a classless society is a condition for the salvation of nations, and *a fortiori* for the salvation of Christ-followers in each nation.

Hence it follows that our mission as the “little flock of Christ” in Sri Lanka is to ***teach our nationals*** to observe the radical love commandment of Jesus (Mt 28:20) by providing the needy with what they lack and thus ***make our nationals his disciples*** (Mt 28:19). The implication is very serious. We the local church and our nation would not escape the harsh verdict of End-Time Judge of Nations

- if our ***food***, on the one hand, is economically inaccessible to the poor and, on the other hand, contaminated from the use of insecticides which have seeped into our soil and given rise to an epidemic of kidney failures among the poor...now spreading down to the many provinces, while in the Tamil North the war and the post-war situation is starving the poor among those that was once well-fed ethnic group.
- if its ***water*** is poisoned by industrial waste and the people’s demand for clean water is deemed a crime to be punished with bullets (as it happened scandalously in a Muslim area in our country); and as long as remedial measures are not taken efficiently and continually to help the masses whose wells and springs have been polluted by

alternating droughts and floods ----not to mention industrial waste;

- if its **health** services are becoming increasingly too expensive for the ailing poor due to the privatization and commercialization of medical facilities;
- if a huge number of war-victims including orphans have been deprived of their **homes** while our urban poor live in *shanties* and the tea estate workers in ‘*lines*’;
- if children and their parents in the margin of society cannot **clothe** themselves with dignity and decency;
- if extra-judicially victimized persons spend their life in **jails** while others are driven to other lands as refugees (as did Jesus and his family) to escape from the unfreedom forced upon them in our own country
- in sum, if the “development of the nation” is measured by only the erection of a megapolis (cf. Enoch, Babel ... condemned in the Bible; cf. also the mega cities Tiberius and Sephoris built by the Herods, father and son respectively, the latter turning Nazareth into a shanty town) and by the construction of super-highways that ensure easy mobility for the rich (as the Herod family did in Galilee), rather than by the *free and universal* availability of an ethically sound as well as economically productive education *for all citizens*, specially the less privileged and discriminated in terms of religion, ethnicity and language.

This reflection can be analogically true of most other Asian nations where Christians are a minority. Hence we Asian Christians have a gigantic task in our hands. Rather than being obsessed with proselytism, i.e., baptizing individuals and increasing the size of the church, we are called **(i)** to witness to Christ by living out the love commandment, cost what may..... which constitutes evangelization; and **(ii)** to enthuse the *People of God* (which we claim ourselves to be) to join men and women of good will, whatever be their religion or race , to ***make a disciple of our Nations*** through a **non-ritual baptism**, i.e., through *our* “immersion” (which is what “Baptism” means in Greek) into the struggles of those who are deprived of the basic needs of life—a struggle that could bring upon us what Peter, in his pastoral letter cited above, calls “undeserved suffering.” A few initiatives at a time by a few concerned persons will build up over the years the condition necessary for the discipleship of our Nations. Both Christian and non-Christian groups are already engaged in this noble mission in many Asian countries. Such attempts on the part of the few could be the basis and the beginning of a massive transformation, namely, **the non-proselytizing Baptism of our Nations into discipleship.**

Note further that in Asia all religions have a message of peace and equality and therefore our missionary mandate requires that we Christians elicit the cooperation of *other religionists* and *non-religionists* or join *their* movements for justice and thus *baptize our nations into a discipleship*—a task that has little to do with “proselytism” that Jesus ridiculed (Mt 23:15). Just as the

*ritual circumcision* which is not redemptive needs to be complemented or even replaced by “circumcision of the heart” (Rom 2:29), so too the *ritual baptism* needs to be complemented and, where necessary, even replaced by the *immersion* (or Baptism) into the death and rising of Jesus (Rom 6:1-4) *in his members* who are hungry and thirsty, sick and naked, homeless and chained. In fact such an approach could also attract other nationals to receive the first baptism and thus join the Little Flock of Christ in its zealous engagement in making disciples of their nations.

This is what “the Spirit and we” must together decide as the early disciples did in the council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:6ff.) when they *re-interpreted* the law of *ritual circumcision* because it “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” to do so (Acts 15:28). Could and should we not re-interpret the **Missionary Mandate** (Mt 28: 19-20) in the light of the condition for discipleship (i.e., salvation) laid down in the **Judgment of Nations** (Mt 25: 31-46), as we have proposed here, after listening to what the Spirit says to the churches in Asia and thus reading the signs of the times?[END]

# **JOURNEYING WITH THE CHURCH**

By **Merl Mendis, OMI**

(A former National Director of Catechetics  
and Bible Apostolates in Sri Lanka)

According to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, “the Church is Jesus Christ in history. “Jesus says, “I am with you always until the end of this world (Mt. 28:20)

When we go through the history of the Catholic Church, we will find three different eras or periods.

1. 27 – 392 A.D - The Golden Era of the Church
2. 392 – 1962 A.D - The Dark Era of the Church
3. From 1962 - The Era of Renewal and Reflection

## **1. THE GOLDEN ERA (27 -392 A.D)**

During the Golden Era, the image of Christ, as human Christ was preached to the people. Like the human Jesus, the Church of this Era appeared as the Church of the Poor, of the Marginalised and of the outcasts. Jesus was the humble and compassionate Leader who became a human being in order to serve and not to be served. The Acts of the Apostles speak about these people enjoying equal status. All the members of the Church were called ‘the Faithful’ of Jesus Christ and of the Church. The Church membership included presbyters, deacons and the lay faithful. At that time every Christian was considered as an ‘Alter Christus’ (another Christ) due to his / her baptism.



## **Characteristics of the first Christians**

1. They were faithful to the teachings of the Apostles
2. They were of one heart and one mind (common life), joyful and generous (Acts 2: 42-47).
3. They had courage to die for an important cause; not scared of death.
4. The practice of virginity by many women
5. They believed in everlasting life.
6. They practiced charity and shared with the poor with great joy
7. They took part in the Eucharist and were faithful to daily prayers

During the Golden era, there were 38 Popes. All of them are saints; 25 of them were martyred. The cross became the official symbol of Christianity. The Council of Jerusalem, the first Council of the Church, was held around 50 A.D (Acts 15:28; Gal 2: 8-10). The members from the Centre and the Periphery agreed on one thing namely to serve the poor always. The poor and the needy were given top priority even above Liturgy or Sunday Eucharist.

In 313, Emperor Constantine, by the Edict of Milan, gave freedom to the Christians to worship according to their religion. In 392, during the time of St. Pope Sericuis (384-399), Christianity became the official state Religion. Pope Sericuis became the first successor of St. Peter who assumed the title of Pope (papa =Latin= father).

## **2. THE DARK ERA (392-1962 A.D)**

The success or the failure of any organization depends mainly on its leadership. During this Era, the Church Leaders (especially the Pope, Cardinals, Bishops) by yielding into the temptations of Possessions (riches), Power and Prestige (status)-the 3 Ps- which Jesus Himself had rejected, had failed to imitate Jesus (Lk 4: 1-13). The Church became the symbol of the rich, the elite, the powerful and the prestigious. The Popes, the Cardinals and the bishops assumed worldly titles. The chief Shepherd (the Pope) assumed the title of “His Holiness”. Each Cardinal assumed the title ‘His Eminence’ and a bishop, ‘His Lordship’. The original meaning of these words was: Papa= father; Cardinal = Chief / a Principal; bishop / episcopus) = Overseer. But the Popes and the Cardinals acted like kings and the bishops became princes of the Church. The image of Jesus Christ presented to the whole world was that of a great and a powerful leader.

In the 8<sup>th</sup> century two Popes, namely Stephen 11 (752- 754) and Pope Hadrian 1 (771- 795) used the title of ‘King Pope’ for their designation.

During the Dark Era, there were 221 Popes but only 47 are saints. From the time of the Protestant Reformation (1521-1958), out of 43 Popes, only 2 are saints.

1. St. Pius V (1566-1572). He was Pope only for six years. He was a Dominican monk from a poor family and had a ‘father’ figure. He was a very kind-hearted person as Pope. His leadership enables Rome to be a very peaceful city. He told the Roman people that he was father to them,

not an army general. He reopened the Council of Trent. He published the Catechism of Trent for the use of universal Church. He ordered the establishment of the Seminaries for the training of young men to priesthood.

2. St. Pius X (1903- 1914) was born in a poor family at Riese In 1893, he became a Cardinal and then Patriarch of Venice. He was not ambitious. When Leo X11 died in 1903, he (Cardinal Sarto) came to Rome for the conclave with a return ticket to Venice. At the conclave, in spite of his refusal, he was elected. St. Pius X advocated daily communion also for young children. He reformed the clergy. He dispensed the sick from fasting before receiving Holy Communion. He established the Bible Institute under the Jesuits and concluded the codification of Canon Law. He decreed the elevation of the consecrated Host and the Chalice containing the consecrated wine during the celebration of the Eucharist. He was a very saintly priest and all his activities were directed towards the sanctification of the faithful. He advised the faithful to receive Holy Communion often, if possible, daily.

Between 33 AD and 1958, there had been 259 popes and only 85 of them are Saints. Many Saints during the Dark Era of the Church proved that God's Kingdom can never be built on Possessions, on Power or on Prestige. Mention must be made of 3 popular Saints who openly renounced these 3 worldly attractions. St. Francis of Assisi renounced riches and possessions, St. Thomas More of London renounced power

and status and St. Eugene de Mazenod of France renounced political prestige.

## **IMPORTANT EVENTS OF THE DARK ERA**

**The followers of Jesus were called ‘Christians’ for the first time in Antioch where Jews and non-Jews lived in peace. The literal meaning of the word ‘Christian’ is a person who is trying his/her best to live like Jesus in his/her society.**

1054 – The great DIVISION of the ONE CHRISTIAN CHURCH into the Western Church (Roman) and the Eastern Church (Greek Orthodox).

1517 – Martin Luther’s Reformation

1524 – The Lutherans

1534 – The Anglicans

1545 – 1563 –Catholic Reformation ; Council of Trent under the Popes Paul 111, Pius 1V and Pius V

1560 – Presbyterians

1600 – The Baptists

1724 – Some Greek Orthodox Churches accepted the authority of the Pope in Rome

1739 – The Methodists

1830 – The Mormons

1872 – Jehovah’s Witnesses, Calvary Church, Assembly of God etc

1869 – 1870 – The First Vatican Council not concluded

1939 – Cardinal Pacelli was elected Pope on the 3<sup>rd</sup> ballot on 2 March (his birthday) and he took the name, Pius X11. He declared 1950 as a Year of Jubilee. He

declared the Assumption of Mary, a dogma of the Church. He died on 9 October in 1958.

## **DARK ERA AND SCRIPTURE STUDY**

ST. Jerome (390 – 405 A.D) translated the whole Bible into Latin, called the Vulgate. He was the first to translate the Bible from its original languages into Latin, a popular language at that time. The mandate of Pope Damasus 1 initiated Jerome's great work.. Later it was revised during the time of Pope Clement V111 (1592 – 1606) after the Council of Trent.

1521 – Martin Luther was the first to translate the whole Bible into German, a language in use.

1850 – New interest in Biblical studies in the Catholic Church with Pope Pius 1X who initiated many reforms in the Church.

1869 – During the first Vatican Council, scientific study of the Bible was approved for the Catholic scholars.

1892 – Pope Leo X111 appointed a Bible Commission.

1893 – In Leo X111's encyclical letter, *Providentissimus Deus*, he spoke of the correct way to use the Bible and the biblical research.

1943 – Pius X11, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Pope Leo X111's Encyclical letter, issued the Encyclical '*Divino Afflante Spiritu*' allowing study of oriental languages, archeology etc. to Catholic scholars.

## **ERRORS CONDEMNED AS CONTRARY TO THE CHRISTIAN FAITH**

1. Freedom of speech, freedom of worship
2. Recognition of a religion other than Catholicism
3. Democracy
4. Marriage contracted in a civil institution
5. Secular schools run by the State

## **FIVE WOUNDS OF THE CHURCH BEFORE VATICAN II**

1. The appointment of bishops by secular rulers
2. The Clergy – Laity division in the Liturgy
3. The poor quality of education of the clergy
4. The disunity among bishops (the result of abandoning collegial model of early centuries)
5. The subservience of Church to money

### **3. ERA OF RENEWAL AND REFLECTION (1962 -1965)**

This is not an era of reformation but renewal, directing the Church to the Golden Era. Pope Pius XII (1939 – 1958) who was the 260<sup>th</sup> successor of St. Peter, the Apostle, died on 9 October 1958. On 28 October 1958, Cardinal Roncalli was elected as Pope. He was 77 years old at his election.

### **POPE JOHN XXIII (1958 -1963)**

Cardinal Roncalli, Patriarch of Venice who was elected as Pope on 28 October 1958, succeeded Pope Pius XII. He took the name John XXIII. No one thought the new Pope would

be able to achieve anything important since he was an ordinary person. Born in a poor peasant family, he had served as a papal Nuncio for a time in some countries including Turkey. He had no other qualifications. The Cardinals thought that his pontificate would be very short because of his advanced age.

The reason why 25 days were taken by the conclave to elect a successor to Pope Pius X11 was due to the division of the conclave members into two camps, a conservative group, led very much by the Italian Cardinals and a very progressive group, mostly non-Italians. The required number of votes to elect a Pope was getting delayed due to this conflict. The final result was reached when the two rival groups came to a compromise by electing a ‘Pro-tem’ Pope who was fairly advanced in age, and a harmless person. They elected Cardinal Roncalli (77 years) as the night watch-man (as in the game of cricket) to hold on till the next conclave. The elected one was a saintly person and he turned out to be one of the greatest popes who ever sat on the Chair of Peter. With him a new era began in the Church.

### **ANNOUNCEMENT OF AN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL**

On 25 January 1959, 90 days after his election, on the feast of the conversion of St. Paul, Pope John XX111 made an important announcement to invoke a World Council in the city of the Vatican, like the first one in Jerusalem (50 A.D), about 400 years since the first Vatican Council.

On 11 October 1962, opening the Second Vatican Council’s first session, Pope John XX111 said, “We all have made

mistakes in the past”. About the opening speech of Pope John XX111, the *Time magazine* in its special edition in which the Great Events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were mentioned, wrote, “Son of a farmer spoke for 40 minutes to the Experts of the Catholic Church”. More than 4000 bishops from all over the world attended the first session of the Council.

Pope John XX111 saw his way barred by the bureaucratic Curia officials of the Vatican. He demanded an open policy to the administration of the Church. He told the Cardinals, “There is nothing that should be closed or locked up in the Vatican. We have nothing to hide”

With his two important encyclicals, *MATER ET MAGISTRA* and *PACEM IN TERRIS*, Pope John XX111 outlined the course of action of openness. He broke the barriers which surrounded him. In the Encyclical, ‘*PACEM IN TERRIS*’, he spoke of building a society and a civilization of love and peace whose foundation is truth, whose objective is justice and whose driving force is love and whose method of attainment is freedom.

World leaders admired the new Pope. Leaders from Moscow, Washington and Paris came to pay respect to Pope John XX111. From Asia and Africa, Presidents and Prime Ministers rushed to Rome to extend their friendship.

Pope John XX111 opened a dialogue with non-Catholic Christians with the view for reunion with Rome. He wanted an openness of the Church to spread to all the parts of the Catholic world. His idea of calling the Second Vatican Council was the result of that desire.



## **POPE PAUL VI**

On 21 June 1963, Cardinal Montini was elected to succeed Pope John XXIII. He took the name Paul VI. He was ordained a priest at the age of 23. Ten years later he began his work in the Vatican Secretariat. He worked for 32 years in the Curia. When he showed his dislike for the anti-Communist policy of Pius XII, he was moved from the Curia and made Archbishop of Milan in 1954. It was the first time in 600 years that Milan was guided by an Archbishop who was not a Cardinal. Pope Pius XII did not give him the Cardinal's hat. When Cardinal Roncalli became Pope (John XXIII), his first act was to make Montini a Cardinal in 1958. Pope Paul VI continued the Second Vatican Council which was begun by Pope John XXIII, and concluded it on 8 December 1965. This historic Council had altered the very face of the Church's two thousand years of history.

## **SIGNIFICANT ACHIEVEMENTS OF 2<sup>nd</sup> VATICAN COUNCIL**

1. Introduction of the local languages into Liturgy, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist, was a great step to enable the faithful to understand all the Liturgical services.
2. Talks which began with the Council about the reunion of all the Christians were another great step. Since the time Peter left Jerusalem in 62 A.D., no successor of Peter had set foot in Holy Land. In 1965, Pope Paul VI flew to Jerusalem to pray at the tomb of Jesus. He embraced the Orthodox Patriarch of the East. It was in 1054, with Michael

Cerilarius, the Archbishop of Constantinople, leaving the fold of Rome, that separation of the Orthodox Church began.

The Coptic Church which broke away from the Roman Church in 451 sought a dialogue with Rome. The Anglican Primate came to Rome seeking means to end the five hundred years old dispute with Rome.

In 1969, Pope Paul VI flew to Geneva to address the World Council of Churches.

According to some Catholic conservative Leaders, the Second Vatican Council was an utter failure and the results were disastrous in some aspects of the Church. Hundreds of priests and Religious left their sacred vocation. But the Pope stood firm; he raised the number of Cardinals to 130. He took away the right to vote from Cardinals who were over 80 years of age.

## **THE CHURCH OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL**

The dream of Pope John XXIII was a Church of all the people, especially of the poor, not only of the baptized but also of the non-baptized. The Church of this era was the Church of the poor, of the marginalized and of the outcasts just as the Church was at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), where the two factions (those at the Centre – Jerusalem and those in the periphery) had agreed to serve the poor, the marginalized and the outcasts. For Second Vatican Council,

Jesus is the Founder of the humane Church of all the people, especially of the poor and the aim was to intensify the daily growth of the Catholics in Christian living. The message according to Pope Paul VI was based on the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The uniqueness of this Council consists in the fact that it moved the whole Church for a radical renewal rather than a mere institutional reform. This renewal is based on giving proper place to the Sacred Scripture and evaluation of tradition. Renewal comes from the base to the summit while reform flows from the summit to the base. In the history of the Catholic Church there had been only one Council of real renewal namely the Council of Jerusalem (50 A.D). Since then there had been only Councils of reforms.

With the radical renewal initiated by the Second Vatican Council, the ordinary baptized Christians can aspire to meet the risen Lord Jesus in four ways. 1. In the Sacred Scripture 2. In the poor and the destitute 3. In the infra-human creation 4. In the Church.

### **THREE IMPORTANT DECISIONS OF SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL**

1. Redefinition of the Church as the People of God (LG 7).
2. Redefinition of the Church as the Universal Sacrament of Salvation
3. The Word of God has authority not only over the Church but also over Church's Magisterium.

## **POST VATICAN 11 LITURGY**

The suppression of the communion rails eliminated the feudalism of the baroque period, which had a higher table for the Clerical Lords and a small table for the lay 'Serfs'. Even the manner of receiving communion in the hand re-emphasises the priestly quality of the People of God and their servant leaders.

(To be continued in the next issue of *The MISSIONARY OBLATE*, no 61, Jan.-June, 2022).

### **P.S**

With gratitude, I would like to acknowledge the inspiration I received from the writings of the late Hilarion Dissanayake, OMI and Aloysius Pieris, SJ.

## Genesis 22,1-19

### The Test of Abraham

Abraham figures prominent in post-exilic Israel.<sup>1</sup> The Babylonian exile of 587 BEC marked the end of Israelite monarchy. In this context, the figure of Abraham may have been important to shape the identity of the people. An Abraham leaving Ur of the Chaldeans to come to the land of promise and a forefather ready to sacrifice his ‘only’ son, heir to the promise in an extreme act of obedience to his God could have been told in order to inspire the exiles to return to their ravaged lands in Palestine in obedience to God.

Human sacrifice was forbidden in Israel: “Any man of the people of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn in Israel, who gives any of his children to Molech shall be put to death” (Lev 20,2); “There shall not be found among you any one who burns his son or his daughter as an offering ...” (Deut 18,10). In that context, it is difficult to understand how God demands Abraham to sacrifice his son. It is important to know that most Biblical stories highlight or underline one value - in this case the absolute obedience to God - and the example drawn to impress upon the hearer/reader may compromise other important or more important values. The ancients were not scandalized by it because they were children of story-telling

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<sup>1</sup> \* Originally published in *Journal of Religious Reflection*, NS 6/2 (2012) 35-40.

cultures. This is also true of much of ancient literature where a positive value is highlighted at the expense of other positive values. Even modern media including highly developed cinematography employ this same ancient art of story-telling.

In that sense, Genesis 22 is artistry. “The story is a masterpiece presenting God as the Lord whose demands are absolute, whose will is inscrutable, and whose final word is grace. Abraham shows the moral grandeur of the founder of Israel, facing God, willing to obey God’s word in all its mysterious harshness. Absent here are Abraham’s voluble evasions ... he is silently trusting and obedient” (Clifford – Murphy, 1991: 25).

Jean-Louis Ska has isolated a concentric structure combined with six scenes (Ska, 1988: 329):

- A. Introduction (v.1a): silent narration
  - B. Scene 1 (vv.1b-2): God speaks
    - C. Scene 2 (v.3): silent narration
      - D. Scene 3 (vv.4-6): dialogue  
(Abraham and his servants)
      - D’. Scene 4 (vv.7-8): dialogue  
(Abraham and Isaac)
      - C’. Scene 5 (vv.9-10): silent narration
    - B’. Scene 6 (vv.11-14.15-18): the angel of YHWH speaks
  - A’. Epilogue (v.19): silent narration

The place of sacrifice rings in the ear of the reader as a refrain (vv. 2.3.4.5.9.14). The place is mentioned when God gives the order (vv. 1b-2), when Abraham departs (v. 3), when the place is seen from far (vv. 4-6), when Abraham ultimately

sets himself into the action of sacrificing his son (vv. 9-10), when the angel of YHWH intervenes (vv. 11.15-18) and when Abraham gives a name to the place (The Lord will provide) (v. 14). Except in scene 4 in which Isaac questions his father and Abraham answers his son in an indirect manner, the place is mentioned in all other five scenes.

The levels of knowledge are also important in this episode. The narrator communicates to the reader that it is a 'test'. God tested Abraham. Abraham does not know that it is a test but the reader knows. So the reader is in a privileged position. Secondly, Abraham is not able to communicate to Isaac or to his servants the reason for the journey. While Abraham knows why he is going to the land of Moriah, Isaac and the servants of Abraham do not know about it. This creates a dramatic tension in the narrative.

**Scene 1 (vv. 1b-2):** The word order in v. 2 of the canonical text is – (1) your son, (2) your only son, (3) whom you love, (4) Isaac. Rabbinic literature fills in the gaps in this narration: "Thy son". Abraham said to God "I have two sons". He answered him "Thine only son". Abraham said "This one is the only son of his mother and the other is the only son of his mother". God then said, "the one whom thou lovest". Abraham replied "I love both of them." Whereupon God said, "Even Isaac". The gradual precision culminates in the name "Isaac" (Rashi, p. 93). God's order specifies the action: (1) 'take', (2) 'go', and (3) 'sacrifice'. The three verbs summarise the plot, the reader expects it to unfold in this order.

**Scene 2 (v. 3):** Abraham *takes* and *goes*. After having saddled his ass, and taken two of his young men as well as Isaac, he cuts the wood for the burnt offering. The cutting of wood which reminds him of the impossible mission is mentioned as the last item. The sequence indicates that Abraham is intentionally delaying the journey and mirrors what goes on in the mind of the silent patriarch. Furthermore cutting the wood is indicative of the *sacrifice*. (The verb sacrifice is not mentioned here directly) (Ska, 1988: 330-331).

**Scene 3 (vv. 4-6):** The dramatic tension rises with the place of sacrifice in view. The reader sees the place of sacrifice rising on the horizon on the third day with Abraham. At last Abraham reveals the intention of the journey to his servants: “Stay here with the ass; I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you” (v. 5). Abraham tells the truth without knowing it. The verbs *take* and *go* are present (v. 6) and the verb *to sacrifice* is missing. Two new objects hitherto unspoken, namely fire and the knife are mentioned (Ska, 1988: 331-333).

**Scene 4 (vv. 7-8):** In the entire episode, Isaac speaks only in this scene. (In fact, in the entire Abraham cycle, this is the only instance, the reader hears the voice of Isaac). The levels of knowledge of the reader, of Abraham and Isaac are different and this is very clear in this scene. From v. 1 onwards, the reader knows that it is a test, and this fact is not known to Abraham. Both reader and Abraham know that God has asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, but this is not known to Isaac. Abraham speaks and this is the last time that we hear him speaking. From here onwards, the patriarch will



remain silent till the end of the episode. The answer to the question of Isaac “Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering” is vague: “God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” Once again as in scene 3, Abraham tells the truth without knowing it (Ska, 1988: 333-335).

**Scene 5: (vv. 9-10):** Only actions are mentioned. Not a word and no reaction. Neither does Abraham speak nor does Isaac react. In this episode the dramatic tension rises to the maximum. The preparations for the sacrifice slow down the narration (Ska, 1988: 335).

**Scene 6: (vv. 11-14. 15-18):** It is with Abraham that the reader sees the ram caught in a thicket by his horns. This is similar to seeing the place of sacrifice in v. 4: “Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place far off” (v. 4). The same expression “lifted up his eyes” is mentioned in v. 13: “And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram ...” All three verbs ‘take’, ‘go’, ‘sacrifice’ which appeared in v. 2, reappear in v. 13: “Abraham *went* and *took* the ram, and *offered* it up as a burnt offering ...” In the scenes in between all three verbs did not occur. Abraham continues to remain silent. After a long silence the voice from heaven addresses Abraham. God spoke to Abraham in vv.1b-2, now the angel of the Lord speaks to him (vv. 11-12). The words of God and of the angel contain all that the reader needs to know about Abraham, namely his love for his son and the fact that he feared God. The reader understands now, after the event has taken place that Abraham remained silent because he feared God. The love towards his son has been

silenced by his fear of God. The reader could guess the same. But it is the angel of God who could affirm it with authority. The voice from heaven praises Abraham and opens a new future to the son who was not withheld (vv. 15-18). The obedience of the patriarch gives a future to all his descendants. The sad mood prevalent at the end of previous scenes has been transformed into a joyous conclusion in this final scene (Ska, 1988: 336-338).

It is a gross misunderstanding if Gen 22,1-19 is interpreted as a divine command to kill Isaac, the son of Abraham. At the beginning of the episode it is clearly said that it is a 'test' and that should clear all such misinterpretations. As seen above the text communicates to the reader, the grandeur of the forefather of Israel, who is able to take up even the most extreme form of sacrifice in obedience to his God, thus prompting that his descendants could do the same. The text was probably meant to teach Israel how to interpret and overcome the trials faced by them in the course of their history, especially in moments of dire experiences when they felt that God had abandoned them completely and annulled their future. It is also possible that the story may have been an appeal to the prosperous exiles living in the rich Euphrates-Tigris valley civilization to take up the extreme sacrifice of returning to the Promised Land which was in ruins.

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## **SERVANTS OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

A few years ago, at a meeting of the representatives of the various Religious Congregations, chaired by Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, Archbishop of Colombo, I said that a comprehensive Course on Religious life must be given at the National Seminary, Ampitiya, Kandy, so that all the diocesan Seminarians will come to know the spirit (charism) and the history of the Religious Congregations. I made this observation since I was also aware of the dispositions, attitudes and the pastoral practice of many Bishops and many Diocesan priests (presbyters) in Sri Lanka.

### **Consecrated Religious life belongs to the Church**

The Second Vatican Council declared that the Consecrated Religious life constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels belongs undeniably to the life and holiness of the Church ( *Lumen Gentium*, no 44). It spoke also of the co-essentialness of the hierarchical gifts and charismatic gifts (cf *Lumen Gentium* 4). Hence Consecrated Religious life enriches the Catholic Church.

During the Synod on Religious life (Consecrated life) in 1994, Bishop Vincent Nichols, the Auxiliary of Westminster, London said, “*Religious are not dependent on bishops to authenticate their apostolic activity. Citing the way in which the Religious had been providing the laity with leadership in such fields as work with the deprived and prayer, he said that these pastoral experiences showed that the participation of the Religious in the Church’s apostolic activity was born of their own intimate spousal love of Christ. Their activity and leadership is not derived from Episcopal mandate or the*

*hierarchical structure of the Church but flows from their proper consecration by God in the power of the Spirit.”*<sup>1</sup>

Archbishop Joseph Tobin, CSSR, former Secretary of the Congregation for Institutions of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life had said, “*The Document Lumen Gentium (no 44) makes the point that Religious life is a fact of the Church and I dare say a constitutive part of the Church*”<sup>2</sup>

### **Charisms of Consecrated Religious to be respected**

Quite aware of the way the ordained presbyters and the bishops in the Catholic Church are ministering, the Jesuit Pope (himself a Consecrated Religious) says: “*The charism of the various Institutes needs to be respected and fostered because they are needed in the dioceses. I know by experience the problems that can arise between a bishop and the religious. I also know that the bishops are not always acquainted with the charisms and works of the religious. **We bishops need to understand that the consecrated persons are not functionaries but gifts that enrich the dioceses. The involvement of religious communities in the dioceses is important. Dialogue between the bishop and the religious must be rescued so that due to the lack of understanding of the charism, bishops do not view the religious simply as useful instruments.***”<sup>3</sup> (Emphasis added)

*“The value of reciprocity which involves Pastors and consecrated persons is to be deepened. Mutual relationships do not exist where some make demands and others submit out*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Tablet*, 15 October, 1994. (Bishop Vincent Nichols is now the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, U.K.). <sup>2</sup> *The Tablet*, 6 October 2012, p 8-9; (Archbishop Joseph Tobin is now in Newark, USA). <sup>3</sup> Pope Francis to the Union of Superiors General of Men Religious on November 29, 2013.

*of fear or convenience.”*<sup>4</sup>

### **Need for a comprehensive Course on Religious Life**

Open to the spirit and teaching of the Second Vatican Council, of Pope Francis, of Cardinal Vincent Nichols of London, and of Archbishop Joseph Tobin, CSsR of Newark, USA, a comprehensive course on Consecrated Religious life needs to be part of the curriculum of the Major Seminaries in Sri Lanka so that the diocesan Seminarians also will come to know and appreciate the charisms of the Consecrated Religious and learn also to adopt a new way of being ordained presbyters (leaders of community communities).

Emmanuel Fernando, OMI

### **AIM OF THE SYNODAL PROCESS**

“Both the German synodal path for church reform and the worldwide synodal process that Pope Francis has launched had one common aim, namely to make the gospel message visible and livable today”, (German bishops’ conference president, Bishop Georg Bätzing).

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<sup>4</sup> (Pope Francis to the participants of the International Congress for Bishops and the Religious on October 28, 201).

# Pope Francis revises synodal programme

By CHRISTOPHER LAMB and CHRISTA PONGRATZ-LIPPITT

THE NEXT bishops' synod in Rome has been postponed until 2023 so that an unprecedented consultation of Catholics can take place in advance. Pope Francis had originally planned a gathering on the theme of synodality for October 2022, but in a radical shake-up, Rome is asking every diocese across the world to begin the first phase of the process on 17 October this year.

Each local Church will be sent details of the consultation and listening process, which must last until April 2022 when a diocese will be required to submit proposals to its bishops' conference. It is not clear yet what the consultation will focus on but the theme of the synod is: "For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission". Bishops will then meet to "listen to what the Spirit has inspired in the churches entrusted to them", to be followed by a "continental phase" of discernment.

From September 2022 until March 2023, bishops from various regions will meet and draft a document to be sent to the synod office in Rome. The final phase of the synod will take place in the Vatican in October of that year.

In a landmark 2015 speech, Francis stressed that synodality is



what “God expects of the Church in the third millennium” and has called for the greater involvement of laypeople in decision-making.

In an interview with Vatican News, Cardinal Mario Grech, who leads the synod secretariat in Rome, said the decision to postpone was because “time was ripe for a wider participation of the People of God in a decision making process that affects the whole Church”.

The synod of bishops’ structure was established in 1965, as a way to assist the Pope in his governance of the Church.

Meanwhile, several local Churches have announced or begun synodal processes including in Australia, Germany, Italy and Ireland, while bishops in Latin America are embarking on a continent-wide process. Cardinal Grech said: “God willing, one of the fruits of the synod is that we might all understand that a decision-making process in the Church always begins with listening, because only in this way can we understand how and where the Spirit wants to lead the Church.”

German bishops’ conference president, Bishop Georg Bätzing, said that “both the German synodal path for church reform and the worldwide synodal process that Pope Francis has launched had one common aim, namely to make the gospel message visible and livable today”.

The German Protestant Churches have issued a statement saying their synodal structure is making it more difficult to deal with abuse. The Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) has yet to publish an overall clerical abuse report. Its

regional commissions last declared in October 2020 that 881 cases had come to light since 1950.

“We are more federally organized than the Catholic Church,” the Bishop of Braunschweig, Christoph Meyns, told br.de (Bavarian radio).

“This means that internal coordination processes take longer than in Catholic dioceses. We are not organised via bishops but via regional synods. In an organization that is structured rather like a parliament, not so much reaches directly from bottom to top and the decision to undertake something together takes time,” the bishop said.

Courtesy: *The Tablet*, 29 May 2021

### **INTERNATIONAL SYNOD ON SYNODALITY IN 2023**

“Pope Francis has decreed that later this year in every diocese, bishop, priests and people must dialogue together in preparation for wider consultations, leading up to an international synod in Rome in October 2023 – on the subject of synodality itself. This time, the synod will not be just bishops talking to each other. Lay voices will be given due weight. The big issue that Francis has laid before the Church is how it can become in reality what it currently is only – for the most part – in theory: the People of God. To hear the voice of the Holy Spirit in all its creativity, the Church needs to listen with all its ears, not just those beneath episcopal mitres. And not just the ears of men. And that is where the answer to the question – where should it be going? – is to be found.

(Extract from the Editorial, *The Tablet*, 29 May, 2021)

## **PARTNERSHIP FOR GOD’S KINGDOM**

Men are ordained as presbyters in the Catholic Church to be servants of the Kingdom of God, by preaching the Word of God (in the Sacred Scripture), guiding the people with the inspired Word of God and the teachings of the Catholic Church, performing the Sacraments, freeing the oppressed, building solidarity and community spirit among people, helping the people to live with dignity, and thereby enabling them to enjoy fuller life promised by Jesus Christ (Jn 10:10).

Similarly, the Consecrated Religious men are also ordained as presbyters in the Church to achieve the above-mentioned objectives, motivated and energized also by the particular charism (spirit) of their Religious Congregations, which the Church has acknowledged and approved. Pope Francis wants the today’s Religious to be prophetic. The charism of each Religious Congregation therefore manifests itself in new creative ways in the life of the Church, especially by responding to the emerging new needs and pains of human and infra-human beings.

Therefore both the diocesan and the Religious presbyters need to serve the Kingdom of God in a spirit of mutuality, friendship, collaboration, solidarity and fraternity, avoiding the worldly spirit of competition, rivalry and desire for power, prestige and monetary gain which Jesus also disapproved in the life of the Apostles, saying **“It should not be so among you”** (*Mk 10:43*).

### **Dioceses and Parishes**

The dioceses and the parishes are structures established by the hierarchical Church in order to continue the mission of Jesus Christ, namely evangelization. The bishops and the

presbyters (the diocesan and the Religious) ministering in the parishes are servants of the Kingdom of God. During the Eucharistic celebrations, they pray to God saying, “Your Kingdom come”. It is to promote God’s Kingdom (Reign) that they are ordained. Therefore the diocesan and the Religious presbyters need to manifest a spirit of partnership to be faithful to the mission entrusted to them.

The Second Vatican Council, speaking of the common mission of all the priests said, *“In virtue of their common sacred ordination and mission, all priests are bound together in an intimate brotherhood which should naturally and freely manifest itself in mutual aid as well as material, pastoral as well as personal, in meetings and in community of life, of labour, of charity”* (L.G,28, para 5).

It is very unfortunate to note the **“ownership”** mentality of many ordained diocesan presbyters (priests) and of the bishops in the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka. By the mode of their behaviour (pastoral praxis), they project that the dioceses geographically and territorially belong only to them, forgetting that they, together with the Consecrated Religious who are ordained as presbyters and ministering in the dioceses, are servants of God’s Kingdom, to promote sacred Gospel values and virtues, which are the ultimate norm and criterion of pastoral behaviour and action. There is the felt-need for mutual dialogue and collaborative socio-pastoral action.

Some diocesan presbyters and bishops consider the Consecrated Religious who are also ordained as presbyters (leaders of Christian community) and ministering in the dioceses as **‘hired missionaries’** (by the bishops) or **“loaned”** by the Provincials (Religious leaders) to the bishops

for a specified ministry and for a specified time in the dioceses. It is very sad to note that such institutionalized attitude and behaviour patterns are very much pronounced and visible in the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka.

Different perceptions regarding evangelization can exist in the diocesan and the Religious presbyters who are ordained and ministering in the dioceses in Sri Lanka. But prayerfully listening to each other can bring about a collaborative spirit in order to give glory to God and for the salvation of the people.

### **The Example of St. Peter and St. Paul**

The ordained ministers of today, can learn from the lives of St. Peter and the other Apostles (who were at the centre) and of St. Paul and his companions (who were from the periphery) how to exercise our pastoral leadership and resolve the 'pastoral' conflicts when they arise. Conflict was and is a fact of life. It is said that St. Paul even opposed St. Peter when he was manifestly in the wrong. However, these leaders of the Church, (from the centre and from the periphery), knew how to listen to each other's opinions and faith convictions and resolve their conflicts. They were persons filled with the Spirit of Jesus Christ. It is also said that they shook hands as sign of partnership at the end of their mutual sharing and decision-making (Gal. 2:1-11). We need to follow their example.

### **Socio-Pastoral partnership needed**

Trying to be innovatively faithful to their charisms, many Religious presbyters do not postpone their compassionate love and care when people in distress need it. They are able also to point out to the Hierarchy certain human situations which often cry out for active presence, availability and sensitivity to the struggles, needs and pains of the different categories of

people. Therefore, it is necessary that the Hierarchy and the diocesan clergy understand the charisms and the giftedness of the Consecrated Religious as explained by the Vatican Council 11, the Synod on Religious life, and by Pope Francis and adopt a collaborative way of ministering in order to promote the values of God's Kingdom in Sri Lanka. Prayerful listening to each other is necessary for evangelization since perceptions regarding evangelization often differ among them. A spirit of partnership is very much needed since it can also edify the lay faithful.

For example

1. Dialogue between the Hierarchy and the Executive Members of the Conference of the Major Religious Superiors (CMRS)
2. Diocesan Pastoral Conventions which include the Consecrated Religious (men and women) labouring in the dioceses
3. National Committees for special apostolates which include the Consecrated Religious (men and women)
4. Diocesan Committees for special apostolates which include the Consecrated Religious (men and women)

It is important that the above-mentioned Committees begin to function in the dioceses in Sri Lanka, adopting dialogue and mutual listening as a means of arriving at meaningful decisions to promote the Kingdom (the reign) of God in the dioceses. Such a way of acting will also respond to Pope Francis' call for a Synodal way of being and acting which can become public and visible also in the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka.

Emmanuel Fernando, OMI

# **IDENTIFYING AND RESOLVING LONELINESS IN PRIESTLY LIFE**

(A lecture delivered by **Chrisantha Jayalath, OMI** at the seminar on Ongoing Formation of the Oblates engaged in Parish Ministry, on 19 January 2021 at Gerard House, 40, Farm Road, Colombo 15)

(The first part of this lecture was published in *the Missionary Oblate*, no 59, Jan.,-June, 2021)

## **REGULAR RENEWAL TO OVERCOME LONLINESS**

### **Enter into Solitude**

- There is a big difference between loneliness and solitude. Solitude is nurtured when there is a healthy understanding of the spirit of waiting which can develop the virtue of patience. This is experienced when one is not constantly craning one's neck to look out for the next distraction in life, but when one is appreciating the things and the people in one's life at any moment in time. It is experienced when one is not harbouring the hope of being somewhere else other than where one is at the present moment and when one is not hoping to be with someone else. When such a disposition takes place, one is training oneself to wait in a healthy attitude. This is undoubtedly more difficult and requires much self-discipline rather than

turning to anything of immediate gratification which at best may keep at bay the inner hunger for a short span of time, but at worst will leave a feeling drier and hungrier than before.

- Perhaps it is for this reason that the priests need to take seriously the daily one-hour of silent prayer before the Blessed Sacrament for the rest of their lives. Among other things, such a practice serves to overcome the loneliness that the celibate life experiences and brings holiness to priestly life and more importantly such a practice will permit this spirit of holiness to establish genuine relationships and perform one's ministry. Such a practice will help a priest very much in his apostolate of presence to people.

### **Healing at the Spiritual level**

- Many in the modern world feel disconnected from our spiritual source. Modern culture, in pursuit of intellectual and physical development, seems to have lost track of the spiritual dimension of life.
- As individuals, when we are disconnected from our own essential being, we will feel empty. Lost and lonely. We lose our feeling of belonging in the universe. Our lives lack a sense of meaning and purpose. Then unconsciously, we strive to fill this inner void in many ways. We may then be driven to



seek money, power, success or search for joy and fulfillment.

- We may fall into addictive behaviours, using food, alcohol, drugs, work, compulsive sex, shopping or gambling as a way to try and fill ourselves, avoiding pain. Sooner or later, we discover that none of these methods fill an emptiness that is basically spiritual. This lack of connectedness to the Spirit is the root cause of many of our social and cultural ills, as well as our own personal ones.
- Healing ourselves at the spiritual level is the foundation of our growth in the spiritual life. Spiritual healing occurs when we find a way to consciously reconnect with the essential being. Through such a connectedness with our spiritual being, we begin to re-experience our oneness with all other beings and all of nature. The more we connect with this essential oneness, the more we will experience a sense of safety, trust and fulfillment. Rather than thirsting for wholeness and trying to fill it from the outside, we will experience our inner emptiness being filled by a source that is within each one.
- Some priests refuse to acknowledge that they ever felt lonely before adult life. They make an emotional investment in blaming others in their adult life for their loneliness. Others find this process very difficult because they are deeply discouraged. Unconsciously, they often feel that loneliness in their lives cannot be resolved or healed. Moving beyond denial, it is

important to try and identify the masks of loneliness and the behavioural patterns or temptations caused by the pain of loneliness. Then the priest has to come to recognize the need to be consoled and renewed daily in order to overcome loneliness.

- Some priests have difficulty receiving love because their ability to trust has been damaged at various life stages. If a priest has difficulty trusting in friendship with his brother priests or with the laity, it may probably be the result of being hurt either in his family background, in the years spent in the Seminary or in his years of priestly ministry.
- This mistrust is also rooted in anger. Therefore, it becomes imperative to resolve the anger associated with this lack of trust. Such a priest may need to spend time imagining him at different stages of life. Then he must try to forgive those who have hurt him including his parents, siblings, peers, fellow priests, religious women and parishioners.
- In this process, many priests are surprised to discover how much anger toward their brother priests they have denied. Resolving anger and forgiving, play a major role in diminishing the pain of loneliness.
- Priests benefit greatly by forgiving.... Intellectually, emotionally or spiritually.... At different stages of life. This process takes some time, but it is regularly and repeatedly followed by experiences of significant emotional relief.

- Priests can also diminish loneliness by striving to let go of their excessive sense of responsibility for different aspects of their priestly ministry. This can be accomplished by sharing their ministry with other priests, Religious and laity.
- When loneliness begins to hurt and injure priests, they can pray and at the same time reach out to others. They can call or visit an elderly person who is alone. Helping someone many times is also a great means of helping oneself. They can call a friend and see if both can go to see a movie or go for a meal outside.
- Some priests are overburdened by an excessive sense of responsibility for members of their families, which may result in their spending their time off at home rather than being with their brother priests or friends.
- Loneliness also diminishes when a priest is thankful for his very special gifts because appreciating one's God-given beauty enhances the ability to receive love.
- Another major factor in not being able to receive love comes about when priests unconsciously model themselves after a father or other male authority figure who suffered low self-esteem or who had difficulty allowing himself to be loved. This conflict is very common in men in all life states and can be undone by trying to make a daily commitment to repeat a father's good qualities, but not his weaknesses. Resolving this father – conflict is facilitated also by the use of past forgiveness exercises.

- Loneliness decreases significantly in priests' lives when mission houses (rectories) become truly homes and places of love and affection. Making a mission house a home includes trying to make mealtime pleasant, avoiding competition with one's brother priests, working enjoying the company of other priests, understanding and accepting dysfunctional priests, and having the freedom to compliment and praise one's brother priests.
- Loneliness also diminishes in rectories when priests are good team players and welcome the input of assistant pastors in parish decision-making processes.
- Priests should have a strong support network of family and friends. Priests should have someone who is trustworthy to talk to and share their daily life (feelings, emotions, desires and hopes).

***“Laughter is the sun that drives winter from the human face.” (Victor Hugo)***

## **FROM ABRAHAM'S CITY OF UR, POPE CALLS FOR INTER-FAITH PEACE**

By **Ameen Izzadeen**

Around three thousand years before Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem, about 1,300 kilometres east at Ur in present day Iraq was born Abraham the patriarch of the world's monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam and other such faiths.

About five thousand years after Abraham began his ministry to sow the seeds of monotheistic renewal, Pope Francis as the representative of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics, last Friday embarked on a four-day historic visit to the birthplace of the patriarch who fathered two nations through his two sons- Issac who is referred to in the Quran as Is'haaq and Ishmael, referred to in the Quran as Isma'eel. From the progeny of Issac emerged great prophets. The Bible mentions a long list of them and the Quran some of them. From the progeny of Ishmael came the Prophet Muhammad, who according to Muslims was God's final messenger to preach the religion of Abraham.

At a time when some international theorists vehemently expound a civilizational clash between religions and cultures, the pontiff's Iraq mission was seen as a fresh bid to strike inter-faith unity among Abrahamic religions. In a broader sense, the visit also emphasized unity among all people whether they are monotheists, polytheists, atheists or

agnostics. This was the common thread or the theme that bound together every stop of the papal visit in Iraq.

After visiting the war ravaged Iraq cities where once Muslims, Shiites and Sunnis, Christians, Yazidis and Sabians lived in harmony before the unity was shattered first by the US-led invaders in 2003 and then by the ruthless Islamic State (ISIS) terrorists, the 84-year-old Pope said, “We reaffirm our conviction that fraternity is more durable than fratricide, that hope is more powerful than hatred, that peace is more powerful than war.”

Saddam Hussein could be a heartless killer, but his government was secular. He believed in unity in diversity. There were many Christians in his cabinet. Among them was Tariq, a Chaldean Catholic. He was the deputy prime minister, foreign minister and close adviser of Saddam. Iraqi Christians numbered about 1.5 million, or six percent of Iraq’s 24 million-strong population in 2003. That was when the US-led coalition forces launched their war to find and eliminate Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction (WWD) though the undeclared objective of the war was to plunder Iraq’s oil. They could not find a single WWD.

Today there are only less than 300,000 Christians in Iraq. More than 1.2 million Christians fled the country when they found that the new Iraq the Americans have founded was not a safe place for them, with the once peaceful country being turned into a hell hole of sectarianism and religious hatred. The cycle of violence is yet to end although the United States has ended its combat operations and withdrawn the bulk of its forces from Iraq, only to let ISIS capture large swathes of

Iraq's territory and establish its terror caliphate where, let alone Christians and other minorities, even Muslims who did not subscribe to ISIS' hardline interpretation of Islam were rounded up and executed.

With his flock depleted in Iraq, Pope Francis who is leading a worldwide campaign for inter-religious dialogue, just as 800 years ago St. Francis of Assisi did, met in the holy city of Najaf the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the highest ranking spiritual leader of Shiite Muslims. Together, the two spiritual leaders delivered a powerful message for peaceful coexistence. According to reports, the 90-year old Grand Ayatollah told the visiting Pope that Christians should live in peace in Iraq and enjoy the same rights as other Iraqis. The meeting at the Grand Ayatollah's humble home was the first in Vatican and Islamic histories between the leader of the Catholic Church and the highest ranking Shiite spiritual leader.

The Vatican said Pope Francis thanked the Grand Ayatollah for having "raised his voice in defence of the weakest and most persecuted" during some of the most violent times in Iraq's recent history. At a public Mass for the Iraqis – Christians and Muslims- the Pope said, "Ayatollah Sistani has a saying, I hope to recall it properly: 'Men (people) are either brothers by religion or equal by creation.'" Bridging of this duality, according to the Pope, is a cultural journey.

The Pope also visited the ancient city of Ur, the birthplace of Abraham, Erbil, the capital of the autonomous Kurdistan region, and Mosul where he stood to offer prayers among the ruins of four churches destroyed by ISIS.

In Ur, known as the cradle of civilization, the Pope attended a gathering of Iraqi religious leaders in an area where the ISIS had destroyed the 6000 years of ancient history that corroborated Abrahamic history.

The visit to war-torn Iraq, where rocket attacks and bomb blasts are still part of daily life, was also the first by the Pope in a year after he was advised to cancel his foreign tours due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Pope's Iraq mission, which he undertook despite security and health risks, was in a way reminiscent of the odyssey of St. Francis of Assisi to Egypt in the 13<sup>th</sup> century in the middle of the Crusade, says Ibrahim al-Marashi, an associate professor at the Department of History, California State University. In an article to the Al Jazeera website, he recounts that during the fifth crusade, the Catholic mystic set out to Egypt to try to promote peace and spread Christianity. During the siege on Damietta in 1219, he crossed enemy lines and succeeded in meeting Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil, nephew of Salaheddin (Saladin). The Sultan declined his request that he embraced Christianity. But impressed by his audacity, the Sultan allowed St. Francis to preach for several days in Egypt.

Upon his return to Italy, St. Francis revised the rule of the Franciscan Order, which he had established, to encourage his devotees to live among Muslims peacefully and avoid conflict. This move was truly revolutionary given the fact that the Church supported the crusades.

Just as St. Francis' visit produced a positive call for inter-faith peace, it is hoped that the Pope's visit will also generate



enough energy to bring about unity among civilisations, religions and cultures.

But the biggest challenge to such unity is the bigotry of fanatics who are distorting peaceful messages of religious philosophies. Instead of promoting peace and co-existence, these bigots are spreading hatred and the message of violence. These fanatics include those invaded Iraq and Afganistan on the instruction of God. Then there is ISIS which is distorting Islam and glorifying violence. Other peaceful religious philosophies are also being hijacked by extremists.

Courtesy: *Daily Mirror*, Friday, March 12, 2021.

## **GREAT CHANGES COME FROM THE PERIPHERY**

**“I am convinced of one thing: the great changes in history were realized when reality was seen not from the center but rather from the periphery. It is a hermeneutical question”** (Pope Francis. Meeting with 82nd General Assembly of the Union of Superiors General of religious men, November 29, 2013)

# WHAT THE POPE, THE GRAND IMAM OF CAIRO AND THE OFFICIAL WORLD SAY OF FRATERNITY.

**By Cardinal Michael Czerny, SJ**

(Cardinal Michael Czerny, who serves as Under-secretary of the Migrants and Refugees Section of the Holy See's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development since 2017, reflects on the significance of the first International Day of Human Fraternity marked on 4 February 2021, in this reflection which is repositied from [www.igNation.ca](http://www.igNation.ca)- the blog of the Canadian Jesuits).

4 February has entered the world's calendar of significant commemorations. On that day in 2019, during his apostolic journey to the United Arab Emirates, Pope Francis co-signed **the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together** along with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar (Cairo), Ahmad Al-Tayyeb. This Document raises the great themes which, 20 months later, would be taken up and developed in the Encyclical *Fratelli tutti*.

The unprecedented encounter in Abu Dhabi soon inspired the creation of the **Higher Committee of Human Fraternity**. The members, an international group of religious and cultural leaders and scholars, are dedicated to sharing the Document's message of mutual understanding leading to peace. The Committee plans to establish an Abrahamic Family House with a synagogue, a church and a mosque facing each other around a

commons on Saadiyat Island in the capital of the United Arab Emirates.

On 21 December 2020, the United Nations General Assembly designated 4 February as the **International Day of Human Fraternity**. In the January 2021 edition of **the Pope Video**, titled “At the service of human fraternity,” the Holy Father highlights the importance of focusing on what is essential to the beliefs of all religions: worship of God and love of neighbour. “Fraternity leads us to open ourselves to the Father of all and to see in the other a brother, a sister, to share life, or to support one another, to love, to know.”

The Holy See’s planning for this inaugural International Day of Human Fraternity has taken place under the leadership of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. The Council was created in 1964 by Pope Paul VI to work on relations and dialogue between the Catholic Church and the faithful of other religions. It holds interreligious meetings, publishes a variety of materials, and collaborates with bishops and episcopal conferences on matters related to interreligious dialogue. Here is the first IDHF video in various languages.

Today, 4 February, Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb are participating virtually in an event hosted by Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, with the participation of United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres and other personalities. The event is being broadcast on Vatican News at 8:30 a.m. (EST).

Cardinal Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot, MCCJ, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, says the celebration “responds to a clear call that Pope Francis has been making to all humanity to build a present of peace in the encounter with the other.” He adds that “in October 2020, that invitation became even more vivid with the Encyclical *Fratelli tutti*” and comments that “these meetings are a way to achieve true social friendship, as the Holy Father asks of us.”

Judge Mohamed Mahmoud Abdel Salam, secretary general of the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity agrees with this perspective. In his presentation at the conference launching *Fratelli tutti*, he remarked that “In this decisive phase of human history, we are at a crossroads: on the one hand, universal fraternity in which humanity rejoices, and on the other, an acute misery that will increase the suffering and deprivation of people.”

In the future, starting in 2022, with the experience of this first celebration of the International Day of Human Fraternity and with more time to prepare, the local Churches will be encouraged and helped to participate actively with intercultural and interreligious events marking this date.

At yesterday’s weekly audience, Pope Francis said: *"I am very pleased that the nations of the entire world are joining in this celebration, aimed at promoting interreligious and intercultural dialogue... The U.N. resolution recognizes 'the contribution that dialogue*

*among all religious groups can make towards an improved awareness and understanding of the common values shared by all humankind.' May this be our prayer today and our commitment every day of the year."*

Courtesy: [www.igNation.ca-the](http://www.igNation.ca-the) blog of the Canadian Jesuits

**In his address to the Cardinals in February 2015, Cardinal Walter Kasper cited Cardinal Newman's essay "On consulting the Faithful in Matters of Faith", which argued it was the faithful, not bishops, who preserved the faith during the controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries. This emphasized a teaching that each Catholic has a sense of faith by virtue of their Baptism. This sense of faith, the Cardinal argues, must be taken seriously.**

**"Capacity to warm hearts does not come from books; it comes from the heart. If your heart burns with love for Jesus Christ, you are a great evangelizer"(Pope Francis).**

**PANEGYRIC ON THE LATE BISHOP VICTOR  
GNANAPRAGASAM, OMI**

by **Maximus Fernando, OMI**

delivered on 12 March, 2021 at Fatima Church, Deans Road,  
Colombo 10.

“Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me,  
otherwise believe on account of the works themselves”  
(Jn 14:1- 11).

Dear Bishops, Dear Rev. Fr. Provincials, Rev. Fathers,  
Brothers, Sisters and my dear Brethren, we, who are gathered  
here at the feet of our heavenly mother to thank and praise the  
Lord for the gift of our dear Brother, the late Bishop Victor  
Gnanapragasam, OMI who passed away exactly three months  
ago on 12 December, 2021 in Quetta, Pakistan, are his close  
associates or admirers. All of us gathered here today are either  
his family members, close and distant relatives, friends and  
confers or beneficiaries of his services.

Hence, our presence is charged with the spirit of thankfulness.  
Our praising the Heavenly Father, today for the gift of Bishop  
Victor and for the wonderful things God has done for this  
humble servant of God, who was a priest, a missionary, a  
Delegation Superior, the first Bishop of the Diocese,  
Balochistan, Pakistan and the first Sri Lankan Oblate Bishop  
who served in a country outside Sri Lanka, is quite fitting.

My dear friends, Victor went to Pakistan as a missionary after  
serving for a few years in Sri Lanka in different capacities.  
But basically he was a missionary, not because he belonged to  
the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary

Immaculate, but also because the areas where he served as a young priest and the type of ministries in which he was involved were basically missionary. Although he was sent to Pakistan, his was an option open to a special apostolic life in Pakistan, essentially missionary and emancipatory.

Geographically and climate wise all the seasons are found in Pakistan. Sometimes the seasons of winter and summer are quite acute and severe. The Missionaries cannot change nature and they have to acclimatize themselves in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. According to statistics of 2017, 98% of the 216.6 million people only 1.59% are Christians. I believe the exact number is more than that and that amount is more than the Christian population of Sri Lanka. Our total Sri Lankan population is about 21.8 million and from that amount only 7% are Christians.

When Sri Lankan missionaries went to Pakistan, Pakistan was very rural except for some big cities. The Christians were among the most discriminated lot. For example, in certain schools there were two water taps, one for the Christians and the other for the Muslim children. One tank with a pipe had two taps, one for the Christians and the other for the Muslim children. Once Fr. Joachim Thaninayagam, OMI who was the assistant Parish Priest of Khanewal, a mission station in the diocese of Multan had to appear in court since a Christian settlement had been destroyed. He was waiting for his case to be heard. He was in his cassock without the cincture since the priests wearing the cassock with the cincture in Pakistan are called “karate wala”. Wearing a cassock without a cincture but with neatly trimmed beard, he looked very much like an

Arab. After having waited there the whole morning, standing and tired, he had gone to a nearby boutique to get a bottle of coca cola. The sweeper, a Christian, who came to clean the boutique saw the priest and quietly went and paid for the bottle out of generosity. The owners of the boutique knowing that he was not an Arab but a Christian Mullah, sent a waiter and grabbed the bottle and asked him to leave the boutique.

On another occasion Victor and Bro. Henry Mendis ( an Oblate Brother who came back to Sri Lanka and became a priest in the diocese of Badulla) were returning from Lahore and on the way, they stopped their vehicle and had two cups of tea from a roadside boutique. When they returned the cups, they were asked to pay also for the cups since they had recognized them as Christians and the cups too were broken. Victor got so angry, frustrated and then turned the vehicle to the canal road to return quickly and on the way a herd of buffalos came to the road and they were blocking his way. He tooted the hone and Victor was made to go very slowly behind them. As they were not giving him the way, having come behind the buffalos for about half an hour and angry about the payment for the cups, he came close to the buffalos in front of him and knocked them and found the side of the land rower badly damaged. Instant changes and quick results were not possible in Pakistan and Victor learned a lesson for his life.

You will be surprised to know why bishop John Joseph, the first Punjabi priest and bishop shot himself and committed suicide in the court premises after a bias verdict ( a death sentence) was given against an innocent Christian in a



blasphemy case. The bishop wanted the international community to know that there was unbearable discrimination against the Christians. But there was not much change. In such an environment in Pakistan, Victor, a young Oblate priest, became the Superior of the Oblate Delegation of Pakistan, a formator and a saintly bishop, having treasured the above-mentioned life experiences in his heart.

As a remedy for the existing discriminatory situation towards the Christians, the strategy of forming Basic Christian Communities, using conscientisation or consciousness raising, based on the philosophy of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed of Paolo Freire and of educating all the Christians was introduced. One of the main agents of this strategy was Victor Gnanapragasam. With his charismatic leadership, regular meetings with the Pastoral teams of the Oblates and the community leaders were held and programmes on community building, leadership and adult education were conducted in all the Oblate parishes. When that strategy became very successful, the Oblates became well known and they were invited by the other dioceses in Pakistan. Such invitations gave more work for Victor since he, as the Oblate Delegation Superior, had to coordinate the missions undertaken. As the number of Oblates also increased, new mission stations were periodically added.

Native vocations started joining the Oblates. And Victor became preoccupied with the idea of building local leadership and handing over the responsibility of the Oblate Delegation to the locals. But things were not moving as they used to be. One night, at a biannual meeting I happened to cross his room

to go to the wash room. It was past midnight and he was awake. I asked Victor why he was still awake. He requested me to sit down and then he said, “Maxi, we are only enjoying our past glory.” He was disturbed so much that he couldn’t sleep peacefully. He felt responsible. He wanted the Oblate Delegation of Pakistan to flourish. For such a mission, he worked hard, lived with apostolic zeal and sacrificed. Such was his commitment to the Oblate Congregation. Such was his love for the Lord.

Victor was very conscious about the members of the Oblate Delegation and also about the members of other Congregations. He had a large heart and could accommodate many persons. Once it happened that I had gone to see him and he told me to sit down and handed me a photo. That was a photo of my parents taken during his last visit to Sri Lanka. It was his routine to visit the homes of the Delegation members whenever he visited Sri Lanka. Personally, for us, missionaries in Pakistan, his visits were very loving gestures since such visits strengthened our parents as they got an opportunity to know about us personally.

I had a very severe attack of hepatitis and was not accepted for treatment in any of the hospitals in the city of Quetta. So the Community of the Franciscan (FMM) Sisters took me to their convent and provided me the needed medical care. I am very grateful to them. Victor was informed about my situation and he took a flight that day itself and arrived in the evening. Seeing me with drips given to both hands, he cried, and seeing him unexpectedly there I too cried. At that moment I felt half cured by his caring presence. That type of personal

concern was always present in him and it was very much appreciated. Whenever we visited him and stayed overnight, he would prepare the bed. Such were the manifestations of his personal tender loving care.

The poor people with whom he worked felt his concern and respect almost by instinct. He could scold them, chase them away and at times boycott visiting them. But they would visit him since they always recognized him as their father, their loved one. They could always find shelter in him, quench their thirst with the same glass he used and return the cups and saucers to be used on another occasion. He was their good shepherd who offered his life and buried his body in their courtyard.

May he rest in peace!

“Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me; otherwise believe on account of the works themselves” (Jn 14: 1-11).

## **P.S**

This panegyric covers some of Maximus Fernando’s personal experiences during the 23 years of his Oblate missionary life in Pakistan. (Ed)

## HOLY SEE: THE CHURCH CANNOT BLESS SAME – SEX UNIONS

**The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith responds in the negative to the possibility of imparting a blessing to unions of same-sex couples, noting that it “does not imply a judgment on persons” involved.**

**By Vatican News**

The Church does not have the power to bless same-sex unions. Such blessings, therefore cannot “be considered licit”, according to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) which **issued on Monday a Response** to a *dubium* that had been presented. Therefore, it is not licit for priests to bless homosexual couples who ask for some type of religious recognition of their union. The CDF says Pope Francis was informed and “gave his assent” to the publication of the Response and an accompanying Explanatory Note signed by the Prefect, Cardinal Luis Ladaria, and the Secretary, archbishop Giacomo Morandi. The Holy See Press Office also published an **Article of Commentary on the Responsum ad dubium**.

The statement is based on specific assertions and some actual practices. The document situates its Response into the context of the “sincere desire to welcome and accompany homosexual persons, to whom are proposed paths of growth in faith”, as expressed also in the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, which speaks of “assistance they (those who manifest a homosexual orientation) need to understand and fully carry out God’s will in their lives.” Therefore, pastoral plans and proposals in this regard are to be evaluated, including those

concerning the blessings of such unions. Fundamental to the CDF's Response is the distinction that must be made between 'persons' and 'union'. The negative response given to the blessing of a union does not, in fact, imply a judgement regarding the individuals involved, who must be welcomed "with respect, compassion, and sensitivity" avoiding "every sign of unjust discrimination" as already written in Magisterial documents.

These are the motivations at the basis of the negative response. The first regards the truth and value of blessings, which as 'sacramentals', liturgical actions of the Church which require that what is being blessed be "objectively and positively ordered to receive and express grace, according to the designs of God inscribed in creation". Relationships, even if stable, "that involve sexual activity outside marriage"-meaning outside "indissoluble union of a man and a woman", open to the transmission of life -do not respond to the "design of God", even if "positive elements" are present in those relationships. This consideration not only concerns same-sex couples, but also unions that involve the sexual activity outside of marriage. Another reason for the negative response is the risk that the blessing of same -sex unions may be mistakenly associated with that of the Sacrament of Matrimony.

The CDF concludes by noting that the Response to the *dubium* does not preclude "the blessings given to individual persons with homosexual inclinations, who manifest the will to live in fidelity to the revealed plans of God", while it declares impermissible "any form of blessing that tends to acknowledge their unions as such".

## **A WOMAN AS AN UNDERSECRETARY TO THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS**

The appointment of Sr Natalie Becquart is particularly interesting as it is the first time ever a woman has been appointed to this position. Sister Nathalie Becquart, who is from France, will have voting rights in the body, which advises the pontiff and debates some of the most controversial issues in the Roman Catholic Church. Ms Becquart has worked with the synod as a consultant since 2019.

The Synod of Bishops is a permanent institution established by Pope Paul VI in 1965, in response to the desire of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council to keep alive the spirit of collegiality engendered by the conciliar experience.

*“Faced with cases of need, one cannot ignore them in favour of superfluous church ornaments and costly furnishings for divine worship; on the contrary it could be obligatory to sell these goods in order to provide food, drink, clothing and shelter for those who lack these things” (Pope St. John Paul 11 in his encyclical on Social Concern, (Sollicitudo Socialis, no 31).*



Pope Francis in Iraq

