

S A N Y A S A

Journal of Consecrated Life



SANYASA

JOURNAL OF CONSECRATED LIFE

Vol. XVI, No. 2

July – December 2021

SANYASA
Institute of Consecrated Life
Carmelaram Post, Bangalore – 560 035, Karnataka, India

SANYASA Journal of Consecrated Life

A biannual published by Sanyasa: Institute for Consecrated Life, Bangalore, managed by the Claretian Missionaries, in view of fostering theological reflection on the life and mission of consecrated life in all its aspects, and in its essential relationship with other forms of Christian life in the Church, with specific reference to the Indian and Asian Reality.

Chief Editor

Arul Jesu Robin, CMF

Executive Editor

S. Devadoss, CMF

Advisory Board

Felix Toppo, SJ (*Bishop, Jamshadpur*)

Jose Cristo Rey Garcia Paredes, CMF (*Professor, ITVR, Madrid*)

Diarmuid O'Murchu, MSC (*Author and Lecturer, London*)

Joe Mannath, SDB (*Executive Secretary, National CRI, Delhi*)

Joseph Mattam, SJ (*Professor Emeritus, Gujarat Vidya Deep, Ahmedabad*)

Shanthi, SAB (*Superior General, Sisters of St. Anne of Bangalore*)

Serena, MSA (*Principal, Sophia College, Ajmeer*)

V. Lawrence, CMF (*Delegate Superior, Kolkatta Delegation, Kolkatta*)

Editorial Board

Xavier E. Manavath, CMF

Paulson Veliyannoor, CMF

S. Devadoss, CMF

Jacob Arakkal, CMF

George Lanithottam, CMF

Pushpa Joseph, FMM

Samuel Canilang, CMF

Michael Plamparambil, CMF

Review Editor

George Panthalanickal, CMF

Circulation Manager

George Panthalanickal, CMF

Manuscripts for publication, books for review should be addressed to: **The Executive Editor**, and business communications (correspondence, subscription, change of address) to: **The Circulation Manager**

SANYASA: JOURNAL OF CONSECRATED LIFE

Sanyasa, Carmelaram Post

Bangalore – 560 035, Karnataka, India

Tel: 080 – 28439259; 28439944; Mobile: 099 6416 1332

E-mail: sjbancmf@gmail.com; sanyasac@gmail.com

Web: www.sanyasa.com

*Published by SANYASA: Institute of Consecrated Life, Bangalore
in collaboration with Claretian Publications, Bangalore, India*

CONTENTS

Editorial.....	153
<i>Mathew Vattamattam, CMF</i>	
Significance of Consecrated Life Today	157
<i>Xavier E. Manavath, CMF</i>	
Making Sense of our Consecration during the Pandemic Times.....	179
<i>José Cristo Rey García Paredes, CMF</i>	
New Perspectives on Mission: SDGs as a challenge of the Spirit.....	195
<i>Babu Sebastian, CMF</i>	
Following Christ ‘at a distance’: Some Considerations on the Growing Mediocrity in Fidelity and Commitment among the Consecrated.....	205
<i>James Kananthanam, CMF</i>	
Clerical Child Sexual Abuse: Victims and Victimisers	219
<i>Tomy Mundankunnel, CMF</i>	
<i>Om, Shalom, and Christ towards a Theology of Interculturality?</i>	235
<i>Book Review</i>	251

EDITORIAL

In 2018, a survey was commissioned by the women's section of the Conference of Religious India (CRI) after media reports indicated widespread exploitation of nuns in the Catholic Church. A four-member team conducted the study for two years (2019-20) and published the findings as a book in June this year (2021) with the title, *It's High Time: Women Religious Speak Up on Gender Justice in the Indian Church*. The book was written by a three-member team led by Sr. Hazel D'Lima, former superior general of the Society of the Daughters of the Heart of Mary.

The team contacted about 500 women major superiors and persons of influence in different women's religious congregations in India. Out of about 500 women religious who were asked to reply after having dialogue with their sisters mainly with those who are in the field at the grassroot, only 121 women religious replied. The researchers then spent months analysing the data, reflecting on each response and the message it sought to convey before putting them in writing.

The book highlights the following problems as faced by the Indian nuns today: low wages, disputes over property, harassment from priests, refusal of sacramental celebrations, and verbal abuse in person and from the pulpit.

The book points out that the religious sisters who work in church institutions are paid the lowest. Those working in sacristy or preparing for liturgy get no payment at all in many of the parishes. Around 47 of 174 dioceses in India pay low wages to religious sisters.

Land is another area which causes misunderstanding in some dioceses with some religious even going to civil courts to resolve the disputes.

The book highlights economic, spiritual and sexual abuses women religious face in the Indian church. The study was "almost silent" about clergy sexual abuse "because the respondents were major superiors and not the sisters in the field", according to Sr. Noellla de Souza of the Missionaries of Christ Jesus, one of the members of the survey team.

The team which carried out this study as asked by the CRI wants the CRI to own this study and expects that the message of this study be taken to all the members of the congregations, dioceses and bishops.

As consecrated persons, it is important for us to be aware of the findings of this survey, study them objectively and commit ourselves earnestly and sincerely to

understand and respect the role of women religious in the life and mission of the Church. We all should work together for gender equality without any prejudice and women religious must be treated with dignity and respect.

The present issue of *Sanyasa: Journal of Consecrated Life* contains six scholarly articles written mostly by eminent scholars on different aspects of consecrated life. The issue also contains two Consecrated Life Lecture Series talks reproduced in the form of article.

The first article is that of Rev. Fr. Mathew Vattamattam, CMF, the Superior General of the Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Claretian Missionaries) titled, “Significance of Consecrated Life Today”. The author beautifully begins with the reflection on “Jesus sleeping in the boat during the tempest” (cf. Mt 8:23-26) in the context of devastating Covid-19 and the recent scandals of Indian Church. Then, he opines that the question of the relevance of consecrated life today and the art work of consecrated life have to be considered in three levels: the individual consecrated person, the religious congregation and consecrated life itself. All these three levels are then dealt in details. He concludes proposing three means to respond to a crisis in consecrated life: enkindling our prophetic charism, having deep roots to withstand the storms and finally cultivating important religious values like humble perseverance, credible witnessing and collective discernment.

Then we have a timely article titled “Making Sense of Our Consecration during the Pandemic Times” by Rev. Dr. Xavier E. Manavath, CMF. He opens the article presenting to the readers the panoramic view of the present situation of pandemic. Then, he elucidates the topic under four sub-titles: the emerging scenario of the pandemic; time to listen and discern; possible pitfalls and finally discerning from a wider horizon. In the last subtitle, he proposes ways and means of making sense of our consecration specially at this time of Covid-19. The author begins with the meaning of consecration and then goes on explaining the forceful recognition of the human fragility; realization of the fundamental giftedness of life and world; serious lapses from the religious leadership; call to return to our home; moving to a new form of personal prayer; emergence from a worship lost in commonality and finally he feels that the catastrophe could be a moment of purgation for the Church as the churches have become increasingly associated with the display of so much of colour, noise, pompousness, glamor, and wealth, eroding their credibility and witnessing value. The author in conclusion invites the readers to surrender to God and to His will (cf. Job 42:2-3; Jn 15:9).

The third article is by renowned theologian Rev. Dr. José Cristo Rey García Paredes, CMF with the title, “New Perspectives on Mission: SDGS as a Challenge of the Spirit”. The author explores the best ways of configuring the missionary

service in the historical moment that we are living and responding to the signs of God in our time. He believes that it is worthwhile to consider as our missionary challenge the sustainable development goals (SDG) proposed by United Nations to be achieved in 15 years from 2015 to 2030. In this context, the author rereads SDGs from the perspective of consecrated life and critically sees to what extent these objectives respond to God's plan for human history, to the signs of the Spirit and to what extent they can be assumed in our charismatic and religious ministries. Finally, he elucidates how the SDGs can be integrated into our charismatic contribution to the mission of God and with what consequences.

Then, the issue contains an article by Rev. Dr. Babu Sebastian, CMF titled, "Following Christ 'at a distance': Some Considerations on the Growing Mediocrity in Fidelity and Commitment among the Consecrated". The article written in the light of the recent document *The Gift of Fidelity and the Joy of Perseverance* of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life sheds more insights into the question of growing tendency of consecrated persons to live a mediocre lifestyle while remaining in the institute. The author opines that mediocrity is also responsible for the difficulties that the religious experience with fidelity, commitment and perseverance. Some of the factors for mediocre consecrated life are failure to construct a solid personal and religious identity, lack of internalization of vocational values and of any significant ideals in life, weakening of one's life of faith, inadequate identification with the vocational project, secularization of the modern society and relativisation of absolutes and ideals, difficulty to live in the prospective of distant future, struggle experienced in the structuring of desire, a poorly formed conscience, inadequate vocational motivation, and the individual's psychodynamics. The author concludes proposing certain means to help such persons live their life of consecration with greater conviction, joy, passion, integrity and commitment.

The fifth article is by Rev. Dr. James Kannanthanam, CMF with the title, "Clerical Child Abuse: Victims and Victimisers". The author explains that in the issue of clerical child sexual abuse apart from the primary victims, there are others also who bear the brunt. The Church, the bishops, the non-offending priests, the family of the victims, the parish community and recipients of the services of the Church are also victimized in different ways. The victimisers are not just the abusive clerics, but also others who make it an opportunity to criticise and tarnish the name of the Church. The media hostile to the Church and civil authorities with vested interests too can be playing the role of victimisers while claiming to do public service. Suggestions are given to search for solutions and Church and State need to collaborate to face the challenges of child sexual abuse.

The last article is by Fr. Tomy Mundankunnel, CMF titled “*Om, Shalom and Christ. Towards a Theology of Interculturality?*” Having lived for four years in an intercultural community, the author feels that the common religion and its faith-living appear to be the unifying factor of the community at the first glance. But a closer look reveals that it is not only the religious elements, but also there are very many common cultural elements in all of them that correlate and keep them related and united. The author then goes on bringing out the sound *Om* in different cultures which in a way unites all as members of God’s family.

Covid-19 has practically disturbed the rhythm of all the educational institutions and ours is not exception. We apologise sincerely for the delay in publishing this issue. I wish you a pleasant reading.

M. Arul Jesu Robin, CMF
Chief Editor

SIGNIFICANCE OF CONSECRATED LIFE TODAY¹

Mathew Vattamattam, CMF

Introduction

The title “Significance of Consecrated Life Today” implies that there is something that is questioning us. I am asked questions like “Is consecrated life going through a crisis?”, “Does it have any future?”, “How long will it survive?”, “What will happen to the Congregations if there are no new vocations?”, “What difference do we make as consecrated persons in the world today?”. These questions come across to me as groans of something dying and something being born in the realm of consecrated life at a time of epochal changes in the world.

We shall begin reflecting on St. Thomas, the patron of India, touching the wound of Jesus and proclaiming Jesus as “my Lord and my God”, the first apostle to confess Jesus as Lord and God.² Touching the wound of Jesus was so powerful that it transformed him and impelled him to come to our land (India) to dedicate his whole life here preaching the Gospel at the cost of his very life. What did happen to him when he touched the wound of the risen Lord? Our own story of transformation has to do with touching the wound of the mystical body of Christ today. The global pandemic is an instance. Following St. Thomas, we need to touch the wounds of the Lord in the suffering humanity to be transformed into apostles of Christ today.

PART I

1. Jesus Sleeping in the Boat during the Tempest

As we are anxious with many questions regarding crisis of consecrated life, we shall begin our reflection with the Word of God, the same Word of God used by

Rev. Fr. Mathew Vattamattam, CMF is the superior General of the Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary popularly known as Claretian Missionaries. After serving the province of Bangalore as formator and novice master for many years, he was elected and served as the general consultor in-charge of formation for twelve years and then he was elected as the Superior General. He holds licentiate in Formative Psychology and Systematic Theology from Gregorian Pontifical University, Rome.

Pope Francis last April when we were all in panic specially Italy as Covid – 19 was devastating Italy with nearly 1000 deaths everyday though India was not much affected at that time.

The Pope invited us to contemplate the scene of disciples caught up in a violent storm while Jesus was sleeping at the helm (cf. Mt 8:23-26). They panicked when they thought that they had to manage the storm alone and that the master did not care. Jesus rebuked the storm to make it calm and reprimanded the disciples for their lack of faith.

We can use this image for the Church's journey and also for the journey of consecrated life along history. There were times of storm and calm; times of growth and destruction. We may recall that iconic drizzling night in last April 28, when Pope Francis stood alone in front of the miraculous crucifix and prayed for Italy and the entire world preparing people mentally not to be afraid. The one who calms the storm is the one who is with us in the boat, the boat of humanity. If consecrated life is in a crisis, we should face it with a similar mindset of the disciples caught up in a storm with Jesus with them on the boat.

2. Questions from the Indian Scenario

Let us take some questions posed recently in India at the peak of the spread of Covid-19. More than 542 priests and religious including bishops succumbed to the pandemic virus. Some asked, "Why didn't God protect His specially chosen people? Why did he allow the bishops, priests and religious to die leaving the Church more handicapped and fragile when she needs them most at this time of decline in vocation to priesthood and religious life?" This happened also in Northern Italy last year; more than 125 priests died of Covid and many of them died by serving the people. Should we not enjoy some immunity because we are following Jesus radically? The answers to these questions must come from the depth of our being. Remember, God the Father did not take the cross away from the paschal mystery to make it easy for Jesus. Neither did Jesus run away from Gethsemane to save himself from the cross. Consecrated life is not a life of privileges and immunity which is denied to the rest of humans, but it is a call to walk on the way of the Lord proclaiming the Good News in hard times and good times. Hence, no privileges other than the joy of carrying the Cross and following the Lord.

Let me point out here some of the unprecedented recent scandals celebrated by the media one after another that shook Indian Church without much elaboration.

- Bishop accused of raping a nun multiple time
- Assassination of the rector of a major seminary allegedly by the accomplice of a priest
- Sexual abuses
- Nun fighting against her superiors
- Financial scandals
- Ex-religious publishing autobiographies with sensational contents translated into different Indian local languages
- Cases of suicides of religious and priests

The Indian Society seems to have forgotten the immense contribution of the Church in the building up of modern India with her thousands of schools, clinics and hospitals, orphanages and many of the best universities. Behind this progress, there are unnamed heroes of thousands of consecrated persons. In times of affluence, the pendulum of public appraisal moves from favour to disfavour. Scandals are scavenged to feed public opinion. When failures of consecrated people abound, one may ask, “How can you find meaning and joy in consecrated life?”

3. The Struggle to Be a Credible Church

I had an opportunity to meet Madre Trinidad, the foundress of Opera di Chiesa (Work of the Church). This saintly woman is moved by the beauty of the Church, the spouse of Christ, for whom Christ gave himself and shed his blood on the cross. For Madre Trinidad, it is this beauty of the Church that needs to radiate before the world. Unfortunately, the last several decades were a hard time of shame and pain for the Church. The Church had to face issues like abuse of minors, sexual scandals, falling attendance in the Church and the churches becoming empty, decline in priestly and religious vocations among others. **The Church looks like a cauldron of irreconcilable issues.** Indeed, Pope Benedict and Pope Francis were committed to address the issues in all honesty and in humility. But it looked that issues were popping up one after the other.

When we are surrounded by Church scandals, one may again ask, “Is it worth dedicating one’s entire life for a fragile Church and her mission? Why does one go for consecrated life? I am trying to situate the question of relevance in the context of the realities presented above especially the more painful ones. And in the midst of all these, the good works that are being done and fine persons that we meet are conveniently forgotten. Some of the finest human beings that I have come across in my life are some consecrated persons. But they are in silent mode working patiently, may be in a slum, may be in the remote frontiers of human struggles. The obscure

part of negative happenings seems to be more interesting and visible in the world where the media plays a big role in magnifying and amplifying them to create truth and post truth.

4. “Come, Follow me”

In the midst of all these noises, do we listen to the voice of the Lord? “Come, follow me!” (Mt 4:19). “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Mt 16:24-25). Unless we constantly return to the initial call experience, we can easily get distracted by the noises around. We need to ground ourselves in the truth of the Gospel to allow these questions to unlock many puzzles of our life.

5. A Story

I would like to begin with a story. A CEO of a renowned company received an invitation to a concert on Franz Schubert’s symphony “unfinished”. As he was busy, he called the Personnel Officer (PO) and asked him to take his place and give him his opinion after the orchestra.

Next day, the CEO asked the PO, “How was it? Did you like the concert?” The PO replied, “The report will be on your table this afternoon”. The CEO was a bit perplexed, but he did not comment. And, indeed, in the afternoon he saw a file on his table titled, *Report on Attendance at the Concert on 18 November 2000*.

Subject: Schubert’s Unfinished Symphony

For considerable periods of time, the four oboes had nothing to do. Their number should be reduced, and their work be distributed throughout the orchestra, thus eliminating peaks of activity. The twelve violins were playing the same notes. Their number can be reduced to six to be cost effective. Often the volume was not enough. It can be achieved by using an electronic amplifier. A lot of effort was put into playing the sixteenth notes. This seems like excessive refinement and I recommend that all the notes be rounded to the nearest quaver. If it is achieved, low-trained staff can be employed at 20% reduction on salary. There is lot of repetition. Repeating the same passages played by the string section with the horn instruments makes no sense. If these redundant passages were removed, the concert could be reduced from two hours to twenty minutes.

Finally, I would like to point out that, if Schubert had taken these matters into account, he would certainly have completed his work without leaving it an unfinished symphony.

I invite you to take some moments to apply this parable to consecrated life. Think of the activist groups clamouring to liberate contemplative women from the prison of their cloisters because, according to them, these nuns are suffering a kind of slavery, doing nothing for the society. Therefore, they should be emancipated. They see nuns' life in the cloistered convents as unproductive and a mere waste of life. People view consecrated life from the perspective of their own ideologies and interests.

6. The Logic of Consecrated Life

It is difficult to make sense of consecrated life outside its own logic just as an orchestra cannot be enjoyed outside the rules of the music. From a worldly perspective, the evangelical counsels do not make sense. Celibacy is ridiculous, poverty is misery and obedience is infantile. There are many caricatures of religious especially women as victims of power abuse and sexual abuse. Claim of perfection contradicted by all the scandals, abuse of allegations and scandals disqualify consecrated life.

In the midst of humiliating caricatures of consecrated life and the publicity given to scandals, is it not surprising that we do not see people leaving consecrated life because of the negative propaganda. Last year I asked some novices why they had joined the convent in spite of all the scandals and humbling presentation of the life of priests and religious. Their answers indeed surprised me. They had their own reasons for joining a religious institute: the other-worldly attraction, hunger for something that they could not find in the world in spite of having good jobs and future possibilities. There is a secret allurements from deep within the heart. When a person discovers it, he/she would not barter it for anything else in the world. Honest and open conversations about the questions raised by others and the consecrated persons themselves can help us to go deeper into the true nature of consecrated life. Honestly opening ourselves to the disturbing questions and probing them courageously can purify and illumine us. And this is my modest attempt in our seminar.

7. The Relevance of Consecrated Life Today

We started with many questions on the relevance of consecrated life today and its future prospects taking into account its fast-dwindling numbers. Honestly, I do not have any answers. I am not a fortune-teller. However, we learn to accept the past, embrace the present, and welcome the future with the Lord's gift of faith, love and hope. It belongs to the Lord of history to call people to consecrated life. It is up to those called to consecrated life to respond to the challenges in each epoch. The Spirit of Christ draws men and women in different moments of history to embrace the form of life that Christ chose for himself.

Let us ask the questions differently. What are the data that raise many questions about the meaning and relevance of consecrated life in the world today? How do we make sense of this data in the context of the changes taking place in the world today? How can we live our call to its full potential to render it meaningful and joyful for us and relevant in the world today? How can we listen to the Lord who speaks through the signs of our times?

I like to think of consecrated life as a joint art work of the Lord and those who have received the gift for it. Imagine your consecrated life as an artwork of God and you, assisted by many others in different roles. If you are an artist, you would want your friends to wait until you finish the work to make final comments. You, as a consecrated person, are an unfinished product, a work in progress, so also, congregations and consecrated life itself in the unfolding of human history. We need to patiently accompany this unfolding process which progresses towards greater maturation and integration spiralling through various stages.

The art work of consecrated life has three instances to consider: the consecrated person, the religious congregation, and consecrated life itself. All three instances have crises built into their growth process.

i) The consecrated person: A person unfolds his/her life through maturational stages of childhood, adolescence, adulthood, middle age, third age and fourth age. In consecrated life there are formative stages of postulancy, novitiate, juniorate, finally professed, etc. Each stage has also its own task and perils. The crisis and struggles of my younger days in the formation house were different from what I go through now. There is an unfolding of my life in a spiral way. We have moments of tranquillity and also moments of struggle. As I grow, I am able to embrace the ups and downs of life in a better way within a single whole. Irrespective of whether one has matured or not, an individual necessarily has to decline with age and finally surrender to death.

ii) A religious congregation is gifted with a charism for a mission in the Church and in the world. A congregation too grows through stages and passes through hard times and crisis heading towards termination or re-founding.

iii) Consecrated life in the history of the Church has gone through very trying times and at times it looked as if it was exterminated. Men and women were drawn to embrace the form of life Jesus chose for himself from the early days of the Church. During the 2000 years of the history of the Church, the Lord has groomed consecrated life through times of tempest and calm, growth and decline.

Before we take up these three instances of consecrated life, we shall briefly explore what a crisis is.

8. The Notion of Crisis

Crisis is something normal and common, both in personal life, in the life of the congregation and in human society at large. What is a crisis? A “crisis is a perception or experiencing of an event or situation as an intolerable difficulty that exceeds the person’s current resources and coping mechanisms. Unless the person obtains relief, the crisis has the potential to cause severe affective, behavioural, and cognitive Malfunctioning”.³ Here in Italy, we had a crisis when the whole health system collapsed during the pandemic last year. Then, the country gathered strength and managed the crisis through proper controls and by effectively availing vaccines to the people. When the country has a grip on the disturbing issue, it returns to normality with a capacity to address similar issues in future. Many things happen in our lives without being prepared for it; for example, betrayal of a friend, a financial crisis, death of a dear person, or a terminal disease. But, how do you handle yourself when they occur? Here comes the need for the skills for crisis management.

There are different kinds of crises. Let us look a few of them:

Developmental Crisis

We have developmental crisis, both in personal life and congregational life. These occur as part of the process of growing and developing through various stages of life. It is also called maturational crisis. It happens when coping mechanisms previously acquired are not enough to deal with the newly arising demands proper to the newly evolved stage. We encounter different moments of developmental crisis in life.

a) *Identity Crisis*: It usually happens during the period of adolescence as a necessary part of the psychosocial development. The symptoms are loss of the sense of sameness, continuity of one’s self, confusion over values, etc.

b) *Quarter-life Crisis*: It occurs in mid-20s to early 30s, after entering into the “real world” at period of uncertainty and questioning that typically occurs when people feel trapped, uninspired and disillusioned. Possibly such a crisis happens in religious life a couple of years after initial formation.

c) *Mid-life Crisis*: feelings of unhappiness, worry, and disappointment that some people experience at about 40 years old and that can sometimes lead them to make important changes in their life. We can think of the disillusionment of some with religious life in their late 40’s or early 50’s.

d) *Existential Crisis (Life Crisis)*: Inner conflicts are related to things such as life purpose, direction, and spirituality. A midlife crisis is one example of such a crisis that is often rooted in existential anxiety. Some religious who find meaning of life in work or in positions may go through a crisis when they lose their position or receive a transfer.

e) *Situational Crises*: These sudden and unexpected crises include accidents and natural disasters or becoming a victim of abuse.

f) *Organizational Crisis*: It happens when leadership failures and issues related to internal functioning or when external factors threaten the continuity of the Organization. It can happen to communities, provinces or congregations. Religious institutes live normally longer than the companies. Previously the average age of company was 65 and now it is reduced to 18 years of life. Congregations generally exist up to 100 years. But good number of congregations die within 100 years. We also have religious orders which are over 1000 years. There can be sudden and smoldering crises in organizations. Often smoldering crisis which are not addressed in time can turn into major issues and crises.

g) *Epochal Crisis*: They occur when human society goes through a period of transformation into something new. Religious life needs to participate in the unfolding new era of humanity. Old ways of handling life situation are ill suited to accommodate the new changes. It is a crisis that is simultaneously social, economic, and environmental, raising the question of an epochal transition on a global scale. Collapse of feudalism is an example. There are scholars who say that humanity is on an edge of epochal changes⁴.

PART II

Let us now have a close look at the three instances of the unfolding of consecrated life through stages with their respective crises to go through.

1. AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

First let us see each one of you, the individual consecrated person. You are on a transformative journey. I take one image from the nature to highlight this aspect: a butterfly. At one time, it was a caterpillar eating more food much more than its own weight. As a result, it cannot move much and goes on eating the leaves. The caterpillar has to abandon this state to enter into the cocoon for the radical transformation to take place. It has to shed much of its weight and put on wings. "What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls it a butterfly". The

light-weight butterfly is able to fly and go around in the garden looking for the nectar of flowers. Its concerns are different from that of the caterpillar. I invite you to think of your major concerns at your younger days. It might have been more about yourself, your look, attractiveness, achievements and so on. When you shed more of your ego-centeredness and embrace a wider world together with others, your humanity is flowering. Unfortunately, much of the suffering of religious life is related to the hurts of ego rather than the real suffering of humanity. It needs a long transformative journey passing through many crises to reach the freedom and maturity of the children of God. It is indeed a great tragedy to embrace consecrated life and die without having tasted the inner freedom and joy in the Spirit proper to this form of life. How do you accompany your own transformative process?

Your own personal experience of consecrated life is the ground to raise this question. Is your life relevant at all? Do you experience freedom and joy in your own consecrated life? Knowing consecrated first hand, how do you evaluate the traumatic stories narrated by our brothers and sisters who left religious life? How do you accompany your own growth process and contribute to the life of your companions in community and its mission in the world?

Taking the Temperature of Your Own Consecrated Life

Let us take the temperature of your own consecrated life. I invite you to rate yourself in a scale ranging 0-10. Level 0 would mean not at all and level 10 would mean fully, and 5 as average.

(Not at all) 0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 (Fully)
----------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	------------

- 1) How joyful are you in your consecrated life at present?
- 2) How satisfied are you in your community life?
- 3) How fulfilled are you in your ministry, your apostolic life?
- 4) How present is the risen Lord in your personal life and ministry?
- 5) How much free space do you allow to God in your life?

Certainly, there is no all-time single response to these questions. Your response might fluctuate from one situation to another. You may not find a religious who is fully fulfilled or totally frustrated all the time. After having given yourself a rating now, you might want to ask yourself some productive questions: How responsible are you for your happiness or frustration? How can you move the scale to the higher value? For example, if you are at 6 on a question, what do you need to do to move to 8? If you find others as responsible for your unhappiness, you might want to own up your own life of consecration and begin a responsible adult life.

I know a zealous missionary who was doing things for God and once he met with a failure in the initial stage of his ministry, the crisis of failure became a stepping stone to a new level of growth. He began to see the need to allow God to do things through him and learn to negotiate good and bad moments in a partnership with God. Thus, there was a shift from doing things for God as a good servant to let God to work through him with his full participation. This shift was an “awakening” to a new way of living consecrated life for him. We all grow physically, intellectually and emotionally as we add on age. But “growing” is different from “awakening” as there is a qualitative difference between these two processes in our life. In “awakening”, we will see more and more meaning to our vows, consecration, community and mission. So, looking at your own self, even if the whole world tells you that consecrated life is meaningful and relevant for the Church and the world, if you do not personally find meaning in it, you will lead a passionless consecrated life.

There is not only a subjective side but also an objective side of values and of truth beyond the subjective realm which one’s heart and mind seek. Finding meaning in life is a combined work of head and heart. Even if you are fully convinced that consecrated life is very meaningful and relevant for your life, if it is established just for free labor in the Church and not based on the Gospel of Christ, you are wasting your life. So, we cannot live consecrated life only because it is subjectively gratifying, but more importantly because it is objectively grounded in the truth of the Gospel. Then only it becomes something worth living. When we ask about the relevance of consecrated life, the subjective and objective dimensions need to be taken into account. A consecrated person falls in love with the Risen Lord whom he/she has encountered through faith and responds to his call because the Lord is truly alive (cf. Lk 24:34; Mt 28:5). Consecrated life then becomes a dance of life with the Risen Lord.

Let me ask these questions: who is in crisis? Consecrated person or consecrated life? Are you going through a vocational crisis in your consecrated life? If yes, what hidden treasures do you think it could be carrying for you? How did you negotiate the crises in your consecrated life in the past and what growth did take place in you? What keeps you remaining in your consecrated life even though some of your close friends have left the congregation? How prepared are you to face your own old age and eventual death? How do you think you can live up to the full potential of your consecrated life? These are important questions which need to be asked at the level of the individual person to benefit from moments of crises that are certain to visit you time and again.

Personal Crises are moments of growth and grace. They are necessarily present in our life. To dream a life without difficulties would be infantile. We need to acquire the spiritual, psychological and intellectual competencies to negotiate the crises in life and grow into better humans. Self-observation, listening, awareness, mindful acting, spiritual guidance, counselling, etc. are helpful tools. And then it becomes a joy to navigate through life with its challenges and struggles. We don't have to hunt for crises as they will present themselves in the opportune time to deliver important lessons for life.

2. AT THE LEVEL OF THE CONGREGATION

We shall now focus on the life cycle of religious congregations. Several stages in the life cycle of a congregation are identified. A new congregation or a new community generally follows the following stages:

- 1) *Pre-natal phase*: it lasts for 10-20 years with a lot of energy and newness.
- 2) *Consolidation*: this stage normally covers 20-40 years. This is a period of progress and consolidation of growth. In provinces after the initial success and vibrancy, there is a period of stagnancy. This is the time members settle with mediocrity and take to comforts and convenience unless a prophetic culture is created. Passion of members for missions in the peripheries is reduced and progressively replaced by self-promoting pursuits.
- 3) *Growth and expansion* within a century
- 4) *Stability and tendency towards decline* in the second century in the congregations. Provinces have lesser span of time. Congregation then begins reorganization, revision of position, etc. within a certain period. Community stops attracting energetic and spiritually zealous individuals.
- 5) *Deterioration and death or refounding and transformation* is the final stage.

Thus, every congregation goes through decline and regeneration or death. Of the 105 orders that were founded before 1600, only 25 remained by 1972. 64% of Orders founded before 1800 are now extinct. This is a natural phenomenon. A congregation can also die if the regeneration or refounding process doesn't happen.

Dealing with Congregational Crises

Congregations or provinces can face growth promoting or life-threatening moments. They can come from external or internal sources. The worst would be the erosion of Gospel values substituted by mundane values. We cannot live as company with company principles and value system. Power struggles, lobbying,

financial abuses, luxurious life-style, pleasure-seeking, factions based on caste, tribe, language, etc. are a few internal crises. Asian and Indian congregations do struggle a lot with factions based on caste, tribe, language, region, etc. External sources of crisis are political interferences and suppression. There were communist governments or other form of governments which have done away with the religious institutes.

It is good to spend sometimes thinking about the stage of your province and your congregation.

3. RELIGIOUS LIFE ITSELF FACING EPOCHAL CHANGES

Epochal Changes in the Human Society

Some of you might have read a book titled *The Fate of Empires (1977)* by John Glubb who studied thirteen empires in the Middle East, Asia, and Europe from Assyria in 859 BC to modern Britain in 1950. He discovered a pattern of decline and fall of these empires. They all declined in the same stages and it always took ten generations, about 250 years. Each generation matures in better socio-economic circumstances created by the preceding generation and move towards increasing materialism. Improved material conditions create attitudinal changes that insist on still more material changes and subsequently begin to experience a period of decline owing to its wealth and erosion of morality.

The patterns pointed out about civilizations are the following: 1) Age of Pioneers; 2) Age of Conquest and Growth; 3) Age of Commerce; 4) Age of Affluence; 5) Age of Intellect and finally 6) Age of Decadence.³

In the Age of decadence that Glubb describes, everyone is focused on their self-interest. Elites protect their wealth; leaders protect their power, and the masses clamor for entertainment. It is an age of worshipping actors, musicians, and athletes; an age of celebrity culture. People become obsessed with the lives of particular individuals, their talents and achievements. Cultures focused on popularity have no depth or resilience. The signs of decadence are marked by defensiveness, pessimism, materialism, frivolity, an influx of foreigners, the welfare state and a weakening of religion. In this context, there are many who say that religious life at present is at the age of decadence and the birth of something new. An epochal change is occurring with the emergence of internet and social media replacing many old security rings. We need to learn to manage this epochal change meaningfully.⁶

Glubb's observation is helpful to identify a pattern of rise and collapse of civilizations, but it is difficult to say that these patterns repeat in a stereotype manner. The collapse of Roman empire is different from the collapse of feudal

system. I think that there is a spiral progression towards higher levels of reasoning and more global networking in the world.

We are now at the epoch of anthropocene. The anthropocene defines earth's most recent geologic time period as being human-influenced, or anthropogenic based on overwhelming global evidence that atmospheric, geologic, hydrologic, biospheric and other earth system processes are now altered by humans. Its acceleration from 1950's has made tremendous impact on every sphere of our lives.

In this massive changing epoch, what is the role of consecrated persons? We cannot simply remain in the same way as we had been. How do we contribute towards life and human solidarity in this changing time with the gifts that are proper to religious life?

The Growth and Decline of Consecrated Life

Is there a pattern in the way consecrated life unfolded in history? Fr. Diarmuid O'Murchu observes that in consecrated life the epochal changes taking place in every 300 years, 50 years more than what Glubb allots for the collapse of civilizations.⁷

According to O'Murchu, religious life has been going through the following pattern of growth and decline:

- 300-600: Egyptian monastic model
- 600-900: The first Benedictine era
- 900-1200: The second Benedictine era (Cluny-Cistercians)
- 1200-1500: The mendicant era (Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites)
- 1500-1800: The Apostolic era (Jesuits, Ursulines)
- 1800- Missionary era. This is the era many of our congregations are founded.

If this model holds good, then indeed, we are heading towards a definite change.

We shall look at each stage very briefly.

1) Rise and Decline of Desert Fathers and Mothers (300-600 AD)

Monastic form of life in the desert began in the 3rd century with St. Antony of Egypt and it flourished gradually till the 7th century. In 400 BC, there were about 5,000 monks in the Nitria region of Egypt. There were also thousands of monks in Syria, Palestine and Asia Minor. They lived a life of extreme self-denial and intense mortification. They were attacked by Barbarians and later Islamic conquests marked the end of desert-based monasticism.

2) Medieval Monasticism (600-1200)

The protagonist of this era was undoubtedly St. Benedict (480-547 A.D). We shall consider the first and second Benedictine era together with the era of the growth of the abbey of Cluny (910) and the Cistercians. The latter were reformed Benedictine orders. Monasteries were the keystone to the stability of European society. The Barbarian Europe became more civilized and humane due to the contributions of these monasteries. Monasteries contributed greatly in education, culture, art, economy, etc. They sowed the seed of learning. Great libraries and magnificent buildings were established by them. Their contribution for the preservation of the Bible and the study of it were truly remarkable. Cluny at its zenith had about 1,400 dependencies under centralised rule, of which about 200 were very important establishments. The Cistercians at their zenith had 742 monasteries and about 900 nunneries.⁸ Thus, Europe was accompanied by the monasteries in its coming out of a kind of a barbarian world to more civilized and educated one.

3) The Mendicant Era (1200-1500 A.D)

It was the time of Franciscans (St. Francis Assisi, 1209) and Dominicans (St. Dominic, 1215). The mendicants lived a poor simple life and dedicated themselves for itinerant preaching of the Gospel in the style of Jesus. Radical poverty and itinerant preaching marked their life-style which attracted many followers. The growth of the Franciscans in the first 11 years was amazing. More than 3000 attended the chapter of Mats in 1221.⁹ Dominicans were about 13,000 by 1256.¹⁰ Reformation marked the end of mendicant era.

Consecrated Life at the Time of Reformation

Let us look at consecrated life at the time of reformation which brought about revolutionary changes when it ranged from 1517 to 1547. Luther could not appreciate the vows and preached against consecrated life. Lot of monks and nuns left or escaped to catholic regions. For Luther, celibate religious life as an ideal was non-scriptural, unnatural, harmful, led to sin and hypocrisy, and must be eliminated. In the territory controlled by the Lutherans, the closing of male and female religious houses was the top priority and it was also an easy way of having access to wealth. As the Gospel of domesticity was preached and marriage was enforced, consecrated life had no place in the vision of Protestantism. It deprived the nuns of doing great service to the society and the possibilities open to women through religious life were also curtailed. Luther married Katherine and they had six children. He said he married because it “would please his father, rile the pope, cause the angels to laugh, and the devils to weep”.¹¹ Even during this time of crisis for the Church, there were

some beautiful saints. There is also an interesting story of Jeanne de Jussie (1503-1561) and the poor Clares of Geneva (1530). They were speaking how they lived that time when people were ridiculing and fooling and doing everything to make them quit their convents. They resisted but ultimately, they had to go.

Henry VIII and the Suppression of the Monasteries: The same wave of Lutheran's Germany continued in England with Henry VIII. He had his own personal issues with the Church and the need for money. From the part of the religious and clergy, there was plenty of wealth, luxury and attractions towards worldly life. It led to laxity and the Gospel mystic was lost. He suppressed monasteries, priories, and convents in England, Wales and Ireland. It was done mainly to increase the income of the crown and to fund Henry's military campaigns. 900 religious houses were there in England at that time: 260 for monks, 300 for regular canons, 142 convents and 183 friaries. There were 12,000 people in total: 4,000 monks, 3,000 canons, 3,000 friars and 2,000 nuns.¹² One adult man in 50 was a religious in England at that time. It is also to be noted that at that time monasteries were lax, comfortably worldly, wasteful of scarce resources, and superstitious.

It also provided saints and men who stood for values and principles like Thomas More and Fisher.

The movement of Protestantism did much damage to consecrated life. However, even in the protestant world, there were Christians who embraced consecrated life once the protesting fever against the Catholic Church began to subside. There are Anglican Benedictine Nuns, Anglican Sisters of Bethany and other protestant monks and nuns in USA, UK and Germany.

4) *The Apostolic Era (1500-1800)*

The response to the devastating impact of reformation on Consecrated life was greatly through the Jesuit order founded in 1534. When Ignatius of Loyola died in 1556, there were already about 1,000 Jesuits working throughout Europe and in Asia, Africa, and Americas in defence of the Church through education and proclamation of the faith in mission lands. In another 70 years, by 1626, the number of Jesuits rose to 15,544, and in 1749 the total number of Jesuits were 22,589.¹³ There are more than 1000 Jesuits who are in the forefront of education and apostolic works even today, even though their number began to decline during the post Vatican period. On the part of Women, Angela Merici with 28 companions founded the first Institute in 1535 for dedicating exclusively to the Christian education of girls. They flourished fast, though in the course of time a major part of them took to cloistered form of life.

French Revolution (1789-1801) was a time of great suffering for the Church and for consecrated life. It exiled 30,000 priests, and killed hundreds of them. The revolutionaries started a new era from the date of Revolution and promoted a religion of Supreme Being and the atheistic cult of reason. Of the 300,000 consecrated men in Europe in 1773, fewer than 70,000 remained by 1825.

5) *Missionary Era (1800-)*

The period after French revolution which sent its strong waves mostly in the western hemisphere signalled epochal changes in the world. The collapse of the old system and breakdown of old securities created new problems and new forms of evil in the society. In the tussle between the Church and the State at the political level, Church lost much of her wealth and power, but gained her prophetic vigour after living through a lot of humiliation. The prophetic spirit of consecrated life responded through the founding hundreds of missionary congregations especially of women. They attended to the poor and the orphans, started schools and offered their services in the new missions. There are two significant external threats worth mentioning during this era.

Communist Revolution that took place a century later in Russia (1917-1922) and spread of it during the period of post-World War II in China (1949), the Eastern bloc (1945-1989, Cuba, 1953) and a few others. Communist regimes hit the Church and the consecrated people very hard. During the Russian revolution, 28 Russian Orthodox bishops and more than 1,200 priests were killed. Catholic Church was practically destroyed. The communist regimes in China, Cuba and East Europe with their inbuilt hostility to religion and adhesion to atheism tried to do away with the Church by silencing, expelling or killing the missionaries.

A special case of hostility to the Church born of communist and anarchist ideology presented itself in Spain during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). In the mayhem created by the civil war, 6832 clerics (13 bishops, 4172 priests, 2354 religious men) and 283 nuns were killed. Claretians alone lost about 270 missionaries as they refused to give up their vocation.

The Current crisis – Post Vatican Eclipse in Consecrated Life in the West

Pope John XXIII convened the second Vatican Council to carry out a much-needed aggiornamento (updating) in the Church. It unleashed far reaching reforms in the Church. At the time of the Council, there were 329,799 men religious and 961,264 women religious. The internal renewal of the Church in adapting to the modern and post-modern society has had serious repercussions in the life and mission of the Church. The renewal called by the Council led to many internal changes. From 1964 to 2009, there were 245 fusions of congregations with similar

charismatic heritage resulting in the disappearance of 460 Institutes including those suppressed during this period. During the 50 years period after the Council, 775 new Institutes founded in more than 40 countries were approved by the Holy See and more than 800 “new foundations” were also born during the same period.¹⁴ Thus, altogether there were around 1269 new foundation in the Church.

Paradoxically, in fifty years, there was worldwide decrease of 33% in the number of religious between 1970-2021. USA witnessed 70% drop between 1970 and 2018. Many factors like abandonment of religious life, death of aged members and lack of new members contributed to the current statistics of the religious. While consecrated life is declining in Europe and Africa, there is considerable increase in Asia and Africa, and it calls for a broader vision of the reality. However, the overall trend is continued decrease in personnel in most congregations.

Why is post-Vatican II era challenging for consecrated life?

The fact of continued decline in the number of consecrated people after Vatican II in the west and the spread of that trend in Latin America and now beginning in Asia have evoked different interpretations and hypotheses from various authors. A recent article of Anton Lingier and Wim Vandewiele views them from four angles: historical, societal, Ecclesial and Theological.¹⁵ We shall look at them briefly. Certainly, there are some truths in each of these perspectives, but, I think, the greater truth is still beyond.

a) Historical: Decline and recovery are normal patterns in the history of Institutes. Decline naturally happens after being in existence for about two or three centuries. Once vibrant and passionate communities become institutionalized, they fail to meet the new challenges and changes in the society which call for new attitudes and competencies. When vibrant communities lose their radical novelty and suffer “routinization of charism”, they are left with three options: evolution (continuous development), mutation (discontinuous reform), and dissolution (death). Typical attitudes of institutes in decline are despair, cynicism, self-interest, etc. Resilience depends on the ability to reinterpret the original charism of the founders rendering their presence relevant and evangelical in the changed society.

b) Societal: Here we deal with issues like secularization, professionalization and increasing secular opportunities for women. Professionalization of the apostolate and the rise of secular opportunities for women in the society caused the specific decline particularly of women religious. Sudden growth of cities, education and jobs for women, individual freedoms and rights, and the dwindling size of the average family household add fuel to the fire. Individualism, authority defiance, and materialism are the added social reasons. In the secular society, there are not

many religious teachers who can exert influence on the youth and accompany them in their faith formation. When confronted with challenges in consecrated life, many nuns felt free to leave the monastery without the risk of being shamed by society or disappointing their parents and families. So, leaving is not a big problem but rather “a respectable reorientation.” New electronics, such as television, mobile phones, and the internet too played their parts. Educated religious are less inclined to be obedient to a non-educated superior. More women became economically independent of their family or convent. All these seem to have caused deep decline in vocation to consecrated life.¹⁶

3) Ecclesial: Vatican II and the Post-Conciliar Conflict: The new ecclesiology of a universal call to holiness as is presented in LG 40 deprived the religious of their elite place within the ranks of the Church. “In one stroke, the Council nullified the basic ideological foundation for eighteen centuries of Roman Catholic religious life”.¹⁷ The feeling of superiority over the laity became less prominent after the Council. Genuine spiritual reasons and ideals for entering consecrated life increased. Practices and convictions that were crucial for generating and sustaining vocations were abandoned by the Council which “adopted a ‘worst of both worlds’ position”.¹⁸ It is like saying that you missed heaven there and living miserable life here on earth without pleasure, power and possession.

Looking at what happened to consecrated life in the post-Council era, the failure to integrate the true spirit of the Council into the cherished customs and practices of religious led to confusion and abandonment. In the first two decades immediately after the Vatican Council II many left religious life and then returned to some sort of stability. Magisterial actions of the last three decades mainly with regard to the scandal of sexual abuses of the children by the clergy and consecrated persons also seems to have affected the attraction of young people to consecrated life.

4) Theological: Pre-conciliar theology and the customs related to the ‘cloister mentality’ were behind the remarkable success of the 19th century active women congregations. The theology of that time was dualistic which presented life in terms of two opposing worlds: the natural versus the supernatural, the sacred versus the secular and the spiritual versus the material. Lot of importance was given for mortification, detachment, and sacrifice. Religious were supposed to be “in the world, but were not allowed to be from the world”. Nuns did not have opportunity for theological formation which priests enjoyed. There were also many anti-modern polemics. In this background, theology became very defensive, anti-modern and unhistorical. It was resilient to scientific criticism but supported supernaturalism. Questioning a vocation was considered as taboo. Consecrated life was seen as a better way to reach heaven.

Vatican II spoke of incarnational and holistic theology. It dismissed outrightly spiritual dualism. It spoke of material and spiritual well-being as complementary and they need not be totally contradictory in nature. Post-conciliar theology spoke of human person as embodied soul or an ensouled body but not in terms of soul and body dualism as if they are opposite to one another. It asserts that “salvation comes from God but is experienced already in this world”. Vocation to religious life is seen as free human response to the free gift of God. The call comes from God but responsible human response to the call with his/her full freedom is also a must.¹⁹ The superficially fertile ground of vocations manured by the pre-Vatican dualistic theology was not good enough for the kind of consecrated life proposed by Vatican II. The post-conciliar struggle of consecrated life was to develop deep roots in the Gospel to withstand the storms of our times and be witnesses and messengers of the joy of the Gospel in the world.

Insights from the Historical Journey of Consecrated Life

The different theories and hypothesis about the pattern of growth and decline of Institutes and about the cause of the crises in religious life are helpful maps to understand many factors that affect consecrated life. I like to draw a few insights from them.

- a) The spiral pattern of growth and decline of consecrated life in a predicable 300-year period has its advantages in identifying certain trends of decline and to work towards renewal in the congregations. However, the proposed pattern looks to me as a forced attempt to place historical data into theoretical boxes. The semblance of a repeated pattern should not ignore the unique qualities of each epoch and the new depth of understanding that humans achieve about life and its meaning. If we view the data from an evolutionary understanding of human progress, there is no repetition in history as human history unfolds in the eschatological direction of the fulness in Christ.
- b) We know that there are many religious orders that have a history of more than 800 years and have weathered many hard times. I think of the remnant monks in oldest monasteries in the middle east, the Benedictines, Cistercians, Franciscans, Dominicans and a few others with more than 800 years of history. They still exist and contribute to the life of the Church. On the other hand, hundreds of congregations died within the first century. There is a different logic that seem to guide the fate of congregations and consecrated life itself. From a human perspective, the older Orders should have disappeared long ago when internal and external events threatened their existence.

- c) Persecutions from outside on one hand and value erosion and luxury on the other have often alternated in history in debilitating consecrated life and its role in the society. Fidelity in times of persecutions and return to the simplicity and vigour of the Gospel helped religious to bounce back either by renewing existing Institutes or founding new ones. Institutes founded without deep evangelical roots and those which leaned heavily on mundane interests easily find their way to their extinction.

How to Respond to a Crisis in Consecrated Life

How do you respond to the crises: yours, of your congregation and of consecrated life itself in our times? Crises in personal life or in the congregations arise when existing structures are inadequate to face the emergent reality within or without. The capacity to allow the process of breaking and building, dying and birthing that takes the person or the Institute to a higher level that includes and transcends the previous capacities is necessary to grow through a crisis. There is no repetition of the same crises once it is addressed well. The crisis of adolescence is qualitatively different from that of mid-life. The epochal crisis of reformation is different from that of the current crisis in consecrated life.

We shall ask a few questions to help us assume our responsibility to deal with a crisis fruitfully. How do you transform a crisis into an opportunity for grace and growth? How do you collaborate with the Spirit of the Lord in co-creating the future of your Institute to render it relevant for the world today? There is a lot that depends on you just as the fate of the little bird in your hand.²⁰ Its life and death depend on your choice too. Each of us has a share in making our own consecrated life relevant and let our Institute live up to its prophetic charism. Certainly, God plays the part that belongs to God and we need only to walk with Him doing our part. Our partnership with God in consecrated life has the following characteristics.

1) Enkindle Our Prophetic Charism

The relevance of consecrated life is in living the prophetic charism proper to it in the orchestration of the life and mission of the Church in the world. A consecrated person who has lost the prophetic spirit is like a domesticated lion. Our life is to be challenged and as Pope Francis says, has to have a calibre “to wake up” the world. Does your life “wake up” others to deeper truth about their lives? How is your Congregation/province a wakeup call in the world?

2) Have Deep Roots to Withstand Storms

It is very important that we internalize the vocational values. Rootless enthusiasm will not last. A Franciscan Superior told me that the film “Brother Sun and Sister

Moon”, a beautiful film on Francis of Assisi and Clara motivated many young people to enter Franciscan order but most of them left very shortly as real life in the friary was not like the spiritual romance of the film.

Consecrated life needs its proper spiritual, psychological, intellectual, moral, relational and charismatic competencies to joyfully live the call. It is the work of the Spirit of Christ in a cooperating person. We need deep spiritual roots to enjoy and celebrate community life, poverty, chastity, obedience, and apostolate. Right at the centre of our life should be our intimacy with Jesus Christ. It is then that all other competencies like intellectual skills, emotional intelligence, time management, communication skills, prayer habits, meditations, personal discipline, sexual integrity, health care, personal boundaries, etc., contribute to the integrity of a consecrated person.

3) Value Humble Perseverance, Credible Witnessing, and Collective Discernment

Dwindling numbers of consecrated men and women can create panic about the future of our Institutes. It is God who calls and our part is to humbly receive and facilitate conditions for others to recognize their call and to grow in it. God’s work does not depend on the show of numbers. God gave 300 men out of 10,000 volunteers to Gideon to face the large army of Midianites and the Amalekites (cf. Judges 7).

All through Bible we come across a God who chooses weak persons and small groups for His cause. It is Jacob and not Esau, Israel not Egypt, David and not Goliath, Moses and not Pharaoh, Mary and not Cleopatra, Paul and not Caesar whom God has chosen for his projects. These choices are absurd on human counts. But that list continues on to our days. The role of anawim, the poor of Yahweh, the remnant of Israel, is a key for us to understand religious life today.

Consecrated life, like human history, unfolds through God’s surprises for humanity which eventually surpasses the wisdom of all human designs for future.

Conclusion

Finally, the core question of consecrated life comes from the Risen Lord. Do you love me more than all these? (Jn 21:15). Consecrated life has a role to play in this changing epoch which we need to discern together and assume it with courage. I come back to the words of St. Thomas when the disciples were afraid to go with Jesus to see dead Lazarus in Judea, “Let us also go that we may die with him” (Jn 11:16).

Endnotes

- ¹ This article is a rough replica of the online lecture given by Rev. Fr. Mathew Vattamattam, CMF, the Superior General of the Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Claretian Missionaries) on 3rd July, 2021 as part of *Consecrated Life Lecture Series – 2* organised by ICL: Institute of Consecrated Life – Sanyasa, Bangalore.
- ² The original lecture was given on 3rd July, on the feast of St. Thomas, the patron saint of India.
- ³ RICHARD K. JAMES – BURL GILLILAND, *Crisis Intervention Strategies*, Boston 2008, 3.
- ⁴ For example, Margaret Wheatly, Joseph Tainter and John Glubb.
- ⁵ Cf. JOHN GLUBB, *The Fate of Empires and Search for Survival*, Edinburgh 1977. See also JOSEPH TAINTER, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, Cambridge 1988.
- ⁶ For more information on this refer, MARGARET J. WHEATLEY, *Who Do We Choose to Be? Facing Reality Claiming Leadership Restoring Sanity*, Oakland, CA 2017, 42-76.
- ⁷ For the detailed study refer the book: DIARMUID O’MURCHU, *Religious Life in the 21st Century: The Prospect of Refounding*, New York 2016.
- ⁸ Cf. “Cluny Abbey” [access: 20.07.21], <https://www.britannica.com/place/Cluny-Abbey>
- ⁹ Cf. HUBERT JEDIN – JOHN DOLAN, ed., *History of the Church*, IV, London 1980, 178.
- ¹⁰ Cf. W. HINNEBUSCH, “How the Dominican Order faced its crises” [access: 20.07.21], <http://www.domcentral.org/trad/crises.htm>.
- ¹¹ Cf. “Katharina von Bora” [access: 20.07.21], https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katharina_von_Bora
- ¹² Cf. RATA SIMPERINGHAM, “The English Reformation” [access: 20.07.21], <http://english-reformation.weebly.com/dissolution-of-the-abbeys.html>
- ¹³ Cf. “Jesuit. Religious Order” [access: 20.07.21], <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jesuits>
- ¹⁴ Cf. GIANCARLO ROCCA, “Nuevos institutos, nuevas formas”, *Vida Religiosa* 108 (2010) 164-172.
- ¹⁵ Cf. ANTON LINGIER – WIM VANDEWIELE, “The Decline of Religious Life in the Twentieth Century”, *Religions* 12/388 (2021) 3-6.
- ¹⁶ Cf. ANTON LINGIER – WIM VANDEWIELE, “The Decline of Religious Life in the Twentieth Century”, *Religions* 12/388 (2021) 6-10.
- ¹⁷ PATRICIA WITTEBERG, *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective*, New York 1994, 214.
- ¹⁸ Stark – Rodney – Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, California 2000, 179.
- ¹⁹ Cf. ANTON LINGIER – WIM VANDEWIELE, “The Decline of Religious Life in the Twentieth Century”, *Religions* 12/388 (2021) 14-19.
- ²⁰ You might know the story of a wicked man who went to test a sage with a small bird tucked in his fist and asked the holy man, “Is this bird alive or dead?”. The sage replied, “It depends on your choice”.

MAKING SENSE OF OUR CONSECRATION DURING THE PANDEMIC TIMES¹

Xavier E. Manavath, CMF

Since March 2020, we have been passing through the shattering and devastating experience of this pandemic. When this virus attack erupted in distant nations, we thought that we would be free from it, but eventually it kept spreading to almost all the nations including our own, leading to the death of almost four million people. This pandemic is an epochal event, quite unprecedented because of this global nature, bringing the whole world into a major crisis at all levels, affecting all peoples and nations, which usually happens only once, during the life span of one generation.

1. THE EMERGING SCENARIO OF THIS PANDEMIC

During the initial months of its emergence, we were anxiously watching how other nations, mostly developed nations, were suffering. We were shocked to see how those developed nations with far better science and technology were struggling and reeling under the attack of this virus. With the declared early locked down in the last week of March 2020, we thought that we would be relatively safe with our better immunity system, known to be tested through all adverse conditions to which many of us are exposed. Hence, we thought that we managed the first wave of the virus, relatively well. Thus began the opening of the locked down. Our government also patted itself on the back saying, Oh, how smart a job we did and turned it as another opportunity for glorification of our leadership. Then came, just after a year, the second wave, more terrifying and destructive. The scenes are fresh in our memories: people struggling to breath, relations frantically searching for oxygen cylinders, hospitals under immense pressure for not being able to accommodate the mounting number of patients, so many lives taken away at the prime of life,

Xavier E. Manavath is a Claretian Missionary who has long experience of service in formation and on-going formation. He has a doctorate from Van Kaam's Institute of Formative Spirituality, Duquesne University, USA and has been the founding director of ICL: Institute of Consecrated Life – Sanyasa. After having served as Provincial Superior of the Claretians of Bangalore and the President of KRCR, he is currently the Director of Claret Nivas, the Renewal Centre of the Claretians of Bangalore Province. He is also the Vicar for Religious in the Archdiocese of Bangalore. He may be contacted at: xmanavath@gmail.com

average death of 3500 per day and a total of over 4 00,000 deaths in the country. The number could be more.

As priests and religious, we also had our share in this human predicament. Among those who got infected and died, there were our own brothers and sisters from the heart of the Church, our own priests and religious. We have already lost more than 500 priests and religious in this second wave of Covid-19. The number could be more. Besides this, many of us had to bear of the pain of losing some of those who have been very dear to us from our own circle of family and friends. We shall be united with them in prayer.

2. TIME TO LISTEN AND DISCERN

I know that we are all passing through moments of immense grief, fear, anxiety, confusion, mistrust, depression, uncertainty, frustration, loneliness, loss of meaning, fear of death etc., probably in varying degrees, due to the alarming spread of this epidemic. This virus has taken all that we used to cherish in a globalized world and made them bitter for us; festive celebrations, domestic and cross-country migration, worldwide transport system — all became super-spreaders of the virus. At the face of death, wealth we have amassed also became useless. The global nature of this crisis has made it very difficult to overcome. The mystery that surrounds the nature of this virus makes it difficult for humanity not only to predict its future direction but also to come out with accurate remedial measures to eradicate it. We still do not know how long will it take to free ourselves from the clutches of this epidemic. We wonder whether the world will remain the same even if we get over it.

One thing is certain. This is the time we are all confronted with questions that we probably have never asked before. And these are questions, I should say, very fundamental questions that emerge from the depth of our hearts. Strangely we hear also other people raising these very same questions and we do not know what to respond or how to respond as we struggle with them in our own hearts. Normally as priests and religious, we are known to have all the answers; but now we seem to be not so sure of our own ground.

As people called to live in consecration to God, the questions that emerge in our hearts and those that other people bring to us are important. Let us not ignore them; neither should we resort to simplified answers. In fact, these questions should become the content of our personal prayer. We shall hold the broken world and wounded humanity in our hearts before the Lord.

My attempt is only to help us process what could be going on especially in the light of who we are and are called to be as consecrated men and women in the

Church. Some of you may not need this as you could be more spiritually perceptive and in touch with God who is helping you to process these difficult moments. Even for them, I want to do it as a sharing from my own heart. Perhaps, what is important is a shared listening and discernment at this crucial time.

3. POSSIBLE PITFALLS

There may be those who ask, where is God in this ruthless and painful pandemic (Covid-19)? Has he gone into hiding?”. We are reminded of what the Psalmist says: “My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, “Where is your God?” (Ps 42:3). Such a question hides beneath an assumption that God is there only to protect us, no matter how we live our lives and manage our world. We presume that God should intervene and protect us when our control is disrupted by unexpected events that push us to the limits of our own management. We expect that his only duty is to keep us safe. Until that time, he remains irrelevant and we live a kind of natural atheism.

As we stay home and remain in recollection, just know that this is certainly not the time to reflect on the source of this virus and raise our anger towards any particular nation, people or person. Let us leave this task to the leaders of our nations and other organization who are duty bound to do that task and we pray that they be guided by the spirit of God in this process. Let us not assume that task which will not do any good to us and instead, we will be on a wrong track of dealing with this current situation. Rational and scientific explanations may not be of much help to tide over the moments of suffering whether personal or global. Fiends of Job who tried to offer such explanations were of not much help to Job in the midst of his suffering.

At this time, our own safety and the that of others are important and we are bound to abide by the guidelines that are offered to us by our superiors, both religious and civil so that we may not become means of contagion causing further damage to the already broken world and wounded humanity. At the same time, let us not create our own narcissistic enclaves obsessively concerned only with our own protection and living insensitively to the sufferings of the poor, homeless, migrants, daily coolies, those living in the slums, path vendors, shop owners, auto and taxi drivers; the list can go on. It is crucially important to lift them all to the Lord in prayer constantly.

Keeping this in mind, however, we must also reach out to assist those who are suffering in one way or another and become source of consolation, solidarity and support. Thanks to all those health professionals in hospitals and covid care centres.

Along with the Government, civil authorities, and many lay organizations and individuals, we, the bishops, priests and religious have been also doing wonderful relief work all over the country. Thanks to all of them. Many have risked their lives and in this process of helping others, may have succumbed to covid and probably also died.

Covid comes indiscriminately and unpredictably without any preference for a class, caste, creed, status or region; it spreads on its own logic and does not work on the criteria that we expect it to follow. Thanks be to God; most of us remain safe. However, let us not look at those who died as less fortunate, more sinful and mercilessly punished by God. We could have easily slipped into their places. We are in no way meritorious than those who passed away. All those who have died, even if they are not from our dioceses, religious congregations or families, they are all our own brothers and sisters, probably more committed to God and pleasing to him than we ourselves. Probably God has spared them from a major disaster that await us. How are we to know? God alone knows. In times of calamity, what we should avoid is passing judgements.

4. DISCERNING FROM A WIDER HORIZON

It is often said that God speaks through the events of our lives; such events could be personal, familial, communitarian, national and global. As the psalmist says, “The mighty one, God the Lord speaks” (cf. Ps 50:1). He speaks so powerfully through events and experiences. In the book of Exodus, God spoke to Pharaoh of Egypt through plague. Prophet Amos mentions of God speaking to the people of Israel through nature, pestilence and plague (cf. 4:6-13). It is a time to tell God like Samuel, “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening!” (cf. 1Sam 3:10). God is speaking and he wants us to listen to him attentively.

Every epochal event that shakes us, especially when it is global, is a multifaced mystery. This means that this is an event through which the Mystery of God discloses in diverse and manifold ways. Each of us including the created realities is a unique form of God. We all came out of the creative power of God’s word. Precisely because of this reason, we are not completely autonomous. We share in the inter-woven and interdependent web of relations, consisting of the cosmos, history and humanity. We are all unified by God’s word. That is why, first of all, every epochal event has different layers of meaning through which God speaks and we need to listen. God can speak to us as unique persons, families, communities, societies and nations. As persons, we need to listen and discern God’s word for us in the context of our own unique personal and vocational journey.

Secondly, the locus of our listening changes as our field of presence and action changes: as families, we need to listen together in the context of our journey as a family; as a congregational community, we need to listen together as a community, as a society within the context of the society that we belong to, as a nation within the context of the nation that we live in. All these meanings can be different but complementary. Even in a family or in a community, the personal “calls” that God offers can differ from person to person, community to community, family to family, nation to nation.

4.1 Meaning of Our Consecration

We are people consecrated to God by the very virtue of our profession. These are expressions that we use ordinarily without understanding what this consecration truly and radically entails. The first commandment tells us: “I am the Lord your God; thou shall not have any other God but me.” Consecration to this God involves a radical pursuit and relentless quest for God, and God alone, which involves, simultaneously, a refusal to make anything other than God the real treasure of our life. This calls for a rebellion of the heart — a rebellion against all forms of modern idolatry, whether it is the idolatry of our own creative powers, potentials, our possessions, our belongings, or affinities; the caste we belong, language that we speak, the faith tradition that we profess, the churches where we worship, the region that we live in, the nationality that we belong, the sports that we love, the fashions that we display, the music that is dear, the films that we admire, etc. There is this tendency to make idols out of everything that we are and we love. When we do so, we fall into different forms of idolatry.

Besides, our consecration to God, implies a commitment to defy all forms of alien compulsions that are contrary to the spirit of the Gospel and to wage war against the principalities and powers that go against the reign of God; it is a rebellion of heart that refuses to accept anything short of God. At the same time, it also involves positively a willingness to recognize, accept and foster goodness, truth and beauty wherever it comes from, especially in this pluralistic world; it also means a commitment to strip through the layers of illusions, lies and deceptions and to pursue after truth in the midst of all collective systems of thought; in the midst of all new forms of colonialism. The search is to perceive the really real and to be committed to that and not to be swayed away by illusions, lies, deceptions, prejudices and misjudgements. It requires of us an ability not only to “think with” but also to “think through,” especially at a time when our consciousness is profoundly shaped by the contemporary media. This is the prophecy expected of us, Religious, by virtue of our consecration to Him.

4.2 Forceful Recognition of the Human Fragility

When we fail in this, God has his own way of making us to realize certain profound truths we usually ignore or take for granted. During this pandemic, ultimately, we are confronted very seriously with a tragic moment of our own fragility as human beings. We feel threatened with a minute, invisible, intangible, microcosmic organism against which all the most modern weapons, including the most accurate and precision bombs that we have so far developed crumble as powerless. We thought we were the absolute owners and had absolute mastery with our knowledge, powers of our intelligence and the roadmap for our progress and development. This virus comes as a collective and powerful SIGN, permitted by God, to make us realize how fragile, limited, broken, vulnerable we are as humans and all the institutions we create.

This virus comes stripping us of our securities. It challenges the security of our own lives, the permanency of our own relationships, the certainty of our own possessions and affinities. At the face of death, even all our wealth becomes useless. This is a collective hit at the illusory control and mastery of the world that we thought we had. “O Man, you are dust and unto the dust, thou shall return” (Gen 3: 19). God has reminded us. These are the words that God said to Adam, recalling how earlier the Lord had “formed the man out of the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life” (Gen 2:7). This had been stark reminder to us when we accompanied our beloved ones who passed away into the graves. We placed our trust in our creativity, in our wealth and in our scientific and technological mastery and accuracy, and we started running our lives and the world in the way we wanted. In that style of living, we have been guided mostly by those who are rich, powerful and famous. This is why even the so called best developed nations of the world did not know how to handle this virus and the leaders of such nations ask their people to go home and stay behind shut doors. Of course, humanity will triumph over it eventually through its innate spiritual capacity for transcendence, but at a cost, through several letting go, from our part.

4.3 Realization of the Fundamental Giftedness of Life and World

We know that this world which God has given to us is purely a gift from Him and we do not have absolute ownership over it. The home that we are born into, the family that we got, our parents, our race, our brothers and sisters, the faith we have received, the nation that we currently belong, along with all the natural and environmental resources are all God’s gift. Hence the natural response of our hearts must have been gratitude, generosity and humility. We were entrusted with these gifts and we were entrusted with a responsible stewardship, respecting the divine

laws that are written into them. He created the world and was entrusted to us (Gen 1:1-31). Since God is the source of everything, His word has absolute primacy of being listened to, especially when we engage the world according to His plan. Please read the Gospels; they provide us with the fundamental norms that should govern our lives, decisions, actions, interactions, relationships, research studies and our developmental plans; we should listen, abide and obey His word.

We generally disregarded this; we insisted on our freedom to live in the way we want, take decisions in the way we want, relate to people in the way we want, acquiring things in the way we want, guided only by desire for self-promotion at all cost. We listen mostly to those human leaders, whether, political, economic, athletic, aesthetic or religious. Just know that these are not gods. We should never surrender to them in blind allegiance. Some of these leaders, we began glorifying, quite oblivious to the fact that they have their own selfish, power-hungry and hidden agendas. We started abrogating these gifts of God as exclusively our own, made walls around them, began accumulating them even beyond our needs, driven by lust, greed, hatred, display of glamor and bigotry. Every nation wants to make itself great, at the expense of others, amassing wealth for themselves, depriving of the others what is due to them, and producing weapons including biological ones to keep others subjugated and docile; they aimed at economic progress at all costs, adding more unnecessary comforts and pleasures to their own people and disregarded the fact that we all belong to one universal family under one God and that we need to care for one another and share what we have with others.

We, under the pretext of development, began plundering the planet earth and its resources out of greed and imposed our own plans and projects on the subhuman forms of existence heedlessly, mindlessly, unethically and immorally. Let us ponder over the simple but profound story of Genesis. The sin of Adam was not that he ate the forbidden fruit, but that he wanted to be God himself, the creature desiring to be the creator and to make himself great as God. His first sin was the sin of disobedience to God (Gen 3:1-7). Let us also reflect on the story of Abel and Cain (Gen 4:1-16). God did not accept the gift of Cain as he was jealous and revengeful of his own brother. There was poison in his heart as he came to offer his gifts to God and God did not accept it. We must marvel at the way the ancient scriptural truths come alive to us during these critical times.

4.4 Serious Lapses from the Religious Leadership

Unfortunately, the leaders of our own religions who are supposed to have shown us the ways of God have also failed us, though not collectively. Several of them succumbed to the classic idols of power, property and pleasure, the three temptations

Jesus had to confront before he began his public ministry. He did that in order to show the way for all religious leaders. Many of our religious leaders, instead of serving their own flock, began abusing them with all kinds of manipulative techniques to serve their own needs. Several others sowed seeds of fundamentalism, fanaticism, disrespect, including violence towards people of other faiths. They started using their sacred positions to boss over, dominate, control and threaten in the name of the gods they seemed to have created on their own, adding more to the disorder and disharmony of the human world. No wonder, all the religious places of worship had to be shut down.

The goal of consecrated life is to grow in conformity with Christ of the Gospel and make our own the vision of life as expressed, lived and spoken by him in the Gospels. As Christian religious, our presence, perhaps, has been turned into more institutionalized corporate presence. We took pride in our institutions, made them centres of power and influence, built on worldly standards, and promoted them more as centres of profit than as means of bringing forth the reign of God. Our personal Christ-like presence which we are called to mediate to others had often been choked and stifled by archaic legalism, insipid spiritualism and excessive activism.² It is good to ask: Are we closely identified with the power structures and its colossal illusions? What are we saying to the world of today? Have we become a “people without prophecy?”³ No wonder all our institutions also have been shut down.

4.5 Call to Return to Our Home

It is good to examine the spiritual meaning of what it means to be in “locked down,” wear masks”, “return to our home,” practice “social distancing,” “work from home” “cleansing our hands,” etc. In the context of the cult of self-promotion and self-expansion, all the above become antidotes. Crowd, collectivity and social conventions were all arenas to project ourselves to the front, make ourselves stars, display our wealth, or to make ourselves rich, famous and popular, assisted by advertisement and effective media management. Look at the way we used to organize our celebrations and sometimes, the unnecessary multiplication of them. Without in any way undermining the right values of fraternity, sharing of love and communion these celebrations are meant to safeguard and nourish, very often, disguised in these celebrations were attitudes of pompousness, display of wealth and power, and promotion of our own selfish goals and interests.

Now we are asked or rather forced to withdraw into the privacy of our own homes.

It is an invitation not just to confine ourselves to our own homes or communities, rather, as Pope Francis, reminds us, to make our home, family, a place of worship, communion and love.” He asks us to make the best possible use of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

However, there is a level deeper than this, that all of us, especially those of us who are religious are bound to listen. In this withdrawal, there is a divine invitation to come home to our own self, to restore our inwardness where the real concerns of our life emerge, giving us more clarity and freedom to respond. We all know that involvements in the outer spheres of our life, whether in ministries or professional work, consume lot of our energy, especially for those who are workaholics; in the society, we are often concerned about how to appear, live up to the expectations of others, respond to the needs of others or to live and act impulsively. There could also be the preconscious defences built on exalted security directives and to keep up appearances. Distancing, even if temporary, paves the way for clarity and freedom. From time to time, we need to make an energetic and clear contact with our life as radical reality.

The evocative power of silence may invite us to let down defences built on our exalted security directives. It may also give us refreshment, restoration of balance, and a shift in consciousness which may bring up much that is glossed over by our ordinary consciousness and perception. The roots of many of our resentments and antagonistic trends lie deeply buried. Only the valuable intimations of the “voice of silence” can evoke these roots and bring them to our focal awareness. It is because of this that Kierkegaard spoke about the “cure” that silence brings: “The present state of the world and the whole of life is diseased. If I were a doctor and were asked for my advice, I should reply: Create silence! Bring men to silence.”⁴

Returning to our home, therefore, implies that we need space and time that those scattered energies get recuperated and replenished in our deepest centre. It is the deepest form of caring for the self, our very soul. Through this we create a sacred space within to come home to oneself to tune into the Lord within. Returning to our home can become moments of integration as it provides the context and the opportunity to assimilate and integrate what God is saying to me both in my prayer and in my interaction with others. It can be the moment of holding together diverse experiences with their possibilities and contradictions while awaiting the birth of a new insight, new intuition, new challenge of being called forth in the service of the Kingdom. In other words, it is the path of discerning one’s own unique vocation and direction. Mathew Fox writes:

The depths of our being are not all sunlit; to see clearly, we must be willing to dive into the dark, inner abyss and acknowledge the creatures we may find there. [...] There is no underestimating the importance of our meditating on our dark and silent origins if we are to make touch with our spiritual depths [...] We also are wrapped in mystery and darkness when pain and suffering come our way, when the death of a loved one or of a relationship or our own dying confronts us.⁵

The practice of solitude in the discipline of silence is an oasis that can be formed in the desert of restless activity. It is the garden that could be cultivated within the self. Jose Ortega Gasset reminds us:

What it [solitude] comes down to, then, is man's need for a periodical and thorough going over the accounts of the enterprise that is his life and for which only he is responsible. This accounting he can make by resorting from the perspective in which we see and live things so far as we are members of society, to the perspective in which they appear when we *withdraw* to our solitude. In solitude, man is his truth; in society, he tends to be his mere conventionality or falsification. The genuine reality of human living includes the duty of frequent withdrawal to the solitary depths of oneself. This withdrawal [...] in which we demand that the mere seeming probabilities, if not sheer enchantments and illusions, in which we live shall show us their credentials of genuine reality.⁶

This truth is expressed well by poet-dramatist Edmond Rostand in *Cyrano de Bergerac*, as the title character speaks of how soul-satisfying it is to “walk in my own way and be alone, free, with an eye to see things as they are, to say “my soul, be satisfied with flowers, with fruit, with weeds even; but garden them, in the one garden you may call your own.”⁷

In a genuine Christian sense, we return to the sources of our beings and discover the beauty of our genuine Christian calling; we re-look at ourselves in the horizon of God's immeasurable love for us, and rearrange our lives, our decisions, our relationships, our homes and surroundings, not just externally and but also internally. It is the time to “be still and know that I am God” (Ps 46:10). According to Merton, one who flees silence will step into the “great formless sea of irresponsibility which is the crowd.”⁸ The tragedy, however, is such that many are, in the words of Thomas Merton, “so averse to being alone, or to feeling alone, that they do everything they can to forget their solitude. How? Perhaps in large measure by what Pascal called “divertissement”—diversion, systematic distraction. By those occupations and recreations so mercifully provided by society, which enable man to avoid his own company for twenty-four hours a day.”⁹

4.6 Moving to a New Form of Personal Prayer

Social distancing, therefore, creates in us a space for a prayerful withdrawal or a sacred spacing to listen and ponder over the fundamental questions that spring up in our hearts. True personal prayer is existential as the psalms are and it springs up from the heart of our life and reality. These moments of prayerful withdrawal can bring together those interests, desires, anxieties, attractions and drives that are closest to our essential being and help us to evaluate them in the light of the truth of who we really are or called to be. The concerns in our life find their true order and balanced unity (Ez 18:31, 36:26). Hans Urs Von Balthazar writes: “Man must continually return to the centre, to be sent thence to the periphery of history and nature with all its babel of languages. It is at the centre that he learns what is decisive, namely, the truth about his life, what God wants and expects of him, what he should strive for and what he should avoid in the service of the divine Word. Thus, he must become a hearer of the Word.”¹⁰

This is where the expression *fuga mundi*, flight from the world that we religious are familiar makes sense. *Fuga mundi*, which was practiced at the origins of religious life in the history of the Church, is not simply a flight from the world.¹¹ It is the call for a contemplative distancing from the world and popular Christianity that sharpens our receptivity to God in attempt to rediscover the world and others in God. It is a call to safeguard ourselves against all blind conformity to mere human conventions, customs and traditions; it means taking a stand against those things in the civil society or in the Christian community that are contrary to the Gospel: the loss of the sense of God, the worship of power and the rampant growth of selfishness. It is to create the space for a “dangerous remembrance of the Gospel” and to symbolize, what some of the Fathers of the Church called, a “holy deviation” before the wider world and the Church. In fact, this *holy deviation* is one of the fruits of what we call personal prayer that occurs in this sacred distancing from the world. Personal contemplative experience can awaken questions in the depth of the hearts. It involves a purificatory process in which the “false” faith that we often live by and confuse with true religiosity, is put to question. Merton says that the very light of the invisible God, which reaches us in the dark rays of contemplation,

can compel us to examine, to doubt and finally to reject all the prejudices and conventions that we have hither to accepted as if they were dogmas. Hence it is clear that genuine contemplation is [...] not mere passive acquiescence in the *status quo*, as some would like to believe — for this would reduce it to the level of spiritual

anesthesia. Contemplation is no pain-killer. What a holocaust takes place in this steady burning to ashes of the worn-out words, clinches, slogans, rationalizations! The worst of it is that even apparently holy conceptions are consumed along with all the rest. It is a terrible breaking and burning of idols, a purification of the sanctuary, so that no graven thing may occupy the place that God has commanded to be left empty: the center, the existential altar which simply “is.”¹²

4.7 Emergence from a Worship Lost in Commonality

I know that some of us are not used to the above type of personal prayer. As Catholics, we usually resort to common, known, routinized, and traditional prayers. Whether in our homes or in the churches, we are so used to common prayers and worship as traditional Catholics. Probably, many of us are sad and even shocked to see that, during this locked down, necessitated by the pandemic, churches have been closed; common liturgical celebrations are suspended and sacraments are not offered. We have been deprived of the opportunity for common worship and liturgical practices in our churches. Many priests who thought of themselves as luminaries, indispensable in this common worship could feel that they have become jobless and could suffer from a loss of identity and prestige. Without in any way undermining the value of these common prayers and worship, which are necessary for our faith formation, we must remember that such practices often become routinized rituals, devoid of any personal meaning and nourishment.

To the Samaritan Woman who desired to know where and how God desires to be worshipped, in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim (a rival temple built by the Samaritans), Jesus responds: “The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (Jn 4:23-24).

Jesus offers a worldwide vision of worship that is at odds with the confined religious thought of both Jews and the Samaritans. It is still difficult for us to comprehend the depth and universality of the new worship of the Father in Christ to which all people are called. This worship effected by the spirit of Jesus, must be first of all an aspiration of our inmost mind, heart and will. In the core of our life, we will be moved by Jesus himself. Only then the outward expression of our inner adoration be pleasing to God and benefit our spiritual unfolding.

That which gives depth to our common worship is the above aspiration of our inmost mind, heart and will. Common prayer without this personal investment,

nourished in solitude and silence will be empty and void. We are not simply a cultic people. Remember the hidden life of Jesus for 30 years before he began his public ministry. Even when he began his public ministry, he went into the desert for forty days and forty nights of personal prayer where he came to be alone with his Father. Moreover, Jesus also has asked us to withdraw into our rooms and pray. Jesus said: “Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and the Father who sees you in secret will reward you (Mt 6: 6). Commenting on the Temple scene where Jesus drives the business people out of the temple, Meister Eckhart has this to say:

Jesus went into the temple and was throwing out those who were buying and selling there, and he said to the others: ‘Get rid of this!’ [...] and they got rid of it. See, then there was no longer anyone there but only Jesus, and he began to speak in the temple. Now you should realize this is true: If someone else but Jesus alone speaks in the temple (that is, the soul), then Jesus keeps silent as though he were not at home. And he is not at home in the soul then because it has other guests with whom it is conversing. But if Jesus is to speak in the soul, it must be alone and must itself remain silent if it is to hear Jesus speak. Yes, then he enters in and begins to speak.¹³

Church with all her ministers and sacraments are meant to nurture and light up our personal relationship with God. They are quite valid and needed means. However, at times, God can take away from us all these means in order to lead us to a “dark night of the senses and the spirit,” leading us to twilight moment where we arrive at a better clarity of things in the horizon of God. It involves breaking and burning of many idols of our inner sanctuary, many demolitions and letting go’s.

4.8 A Moment of Purgation for the Church

In modern times, it must be noted that our mainline churches have become increasingly associated with the display of so much of colour, noise, pompousness, glamor, and wealth, eroding their credibility and witnessing value. Some of them have been steeped in power politics, property disputes, polarized divisions and clerical abuses.

We are reminded of Prophet Haggai who warned the people of Israel that the misfortunes in their life happened because “my house lies in ruins.” He invites them to “consider how they had fared” and calls them to rebuild the house of the Lord (cf. 1:3-14). Prophet may have meant rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple after the Babylonian destruction. But what does “rebuilding the house of the Lord” mean for us in the light of what we have been describing?

Let us reflect on the act of purification of the temple of Jerusalem that Jesus did deliberately (Jn 2:13-22; Mt 21:12-17). This is symbolic of the purification that needed to be done in our contemporary ecclesial presence and active ministries. We often run into the danger of glorifying ourselves, our ministers, churches, our denominations and even the uniqueness of our own liturgical traditions even at the exclusion of others. Affirmation of our identity should not be made at the cost of excluding others. Besides, in these modern times, there are many unevangelical tendencies that have crept in, such as competition in building churches surpassing others, business deals mixed with worship, treating sacramental services as paid, etc. All such attitudes and expressions are not essentials to true worship of God and some of them are mere human conventions and also aberrations, violating the fundamental norms of the Gospel. Some priests project themselves as bosses with imposing authority, insecure to listen and receive from others and forgot their call to be humble ministers to the flock of Jesus. Our sacred ministers will have to re-examine their own style of living and functioning; they have to move beyond mere cultic roles, broaden their understanding of pastoral ministry and look for more innovative ways of shepherding their flock. Their availability and accessibility to people in times of need, go a long way in making them channels of God's love and mercy.

Let us remember that we are called to follow the Lord who had "nowhere to lay down his head" (Lk 9:58; Mt 8:20); he was born in someone else's manger, died on someone else's cross and buried in somebody else's tomb. His heart was always throbbing with an air of freedom where people received comfort and consolation.

5. CONCLUSION

It is no wonder, then, that corona virus comes, quite unexpectedly beyond all our imagination, making us to fall on our knees, struggle and scramble, and not knowing the way forward. But let us be certain that nothing happens without the knowledge of God. If God has allowed this epochal global event to happen, there are messages that He wants to communicate to us and we must listen and discern. However, no human can claim any monopoly of these messages. No one can claim to read the mind of God. Faith, however, opens our eyes to the unlimited horizons he opens for us and calls us to discover in every adversity the possibility for renewal. Hidden in this event is a true call for conversion for the whole world at different levels — a call for conversion that we did not look for but on that is thrust upon us by God. This is a call to conversion, quite different from the routinized conversion,

called for as we pass through different liturgical seasons — a conversion that will have far reaching implications for individuals, families, communities, societies and nations. This is what I believe.

Even if we survive the present crisis, we and the world hereafter cannot remain the same. We just simply cannot go on living in the way we have been living. And this too, as individuals, families, communities, societies and nations. Everyone has homework to do. We must change and be determined to build a more human, just, compassionate and harmonious world under the authority of the One God who taught us to love him and love others in the way he has loved. There are lessons to be learnt, letting go's to be made, sacrifices to be undertaken at the service of a new evangelical vision and living.

Having said this, all we need to do is to surrender to Him and to His will. Like Job, we too should simply surrender and acknowledge, “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore, I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (Job 42:2-3). Let us rest in the arms of God. “As Father has loved me so I have loved you. Abide in my love” (Jn 15:9).

Endnotes

¹ This article is a rough replica of the online lecture given by Rev. Dr. Xavier E. Manavath, CMF on 12th June, 2021 as part of *Consecrated Life Lecture Series – 1* organised by ICL: Institute of Consecrated Life – Sanyasa, Bangalore.

² *Vita Consecrata*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II on Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World (Rome 1996), 62-63; hereafter abbreviated as VC.

³ VC 51, 57-58.

⁴ Quoted by MAX PICARD in *The World of Silence*, trans. Stanley Godmann, Chicago 1952, 232.

⁵ MATHEW FOX, *Original Blessing*, Santa Fe, 1983, 135-136.

⁶ JOSE ORTEGA Y GASSET, *Man and People*, trans. Willard R. Trask, New York 1957, 99.

⁷ Quoted by ALICE BORCHARD GREENE in *The Philosophy of Silence*, New York 1940, 223.

⁸ THOMAS MERTON, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New York 1972, 54. See also THOMAS P. MCDONNELL, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, Garden City, NY 1974, 457-63; *Wisdom of the Desert*, New York 1970, 3-24.

⁹ THOMAS MERTON, *Disputed Questions*, New York 1985, 164.

¹⁰ HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison, San Francisco 1986, 20.

¹¹ In fact, Thomas Merton warns those who want to flee the world and its challenges under the guise of seeking God. He writes: “If you go into the desert merely to get away from people you dislike, you will find neither peace nor solitude; you will only isolate yourself with a tribe of devils. He who isolates himself in order to enjoy a kind of independence in his egoistic and external self does not find unity at all, for he disintegrates into a multiplicity of conflicting passions and finally ends in confusion and total unreality. Solitude is not and can never be narcissistic dialogue of the ego with itself. Such self-contemplation is a futile attempt to establish the finite self as infinite, to make it permanently independent of all other beings: MERTON, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 52.

¹² MERTON, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 12-13.

¹³ BERNARD MCGINN, ed., Meister Eckhart: *Teacher and Preacher*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, New York 1986, 242.

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON MISSION: SDGS AS A CHALLENGE OF THE SPIRIT

José Cristo Rey García Paredes, CMF

Let us reflect on an issue that seems to me to be of vital importance at this moment that we are living: How to configure our missionary service in this historical moment that we are living; and based on the signs of God in our time. This is what this reflection tries to offer: “New perspectives on Mission.

I am going to divide my reflection into four parts:

- **First: Congregations in Mission: going out** – in it I wish to explain how our General Chapters in Consecrated Life have tried to respond to the signs of the times — after the Second Vatican Council — following the directives of the Church.
- **Second: The Sustainable Development Goals** — SDG — that the United Nations has proposed to achieve in 15 years, from 2015 to 2030. The intention is to consider these objectives as a possible challenge for us.
- **Third: Towards a rereading of the SDGs from the perspective of Consecrated Life.** I try to see to what extent these objectives respond to God’s plan for human history, to the signs of the Spirit, and to what extent they can also be assumed in our charismatic and religious ministries.
- **Fourth: New perspectives of Mission.** In this last part I will try to make explicit how the Sustainable Development Goals can be integrated into our charismatic contribution to the Mission of God and with what consequences.

José Cristo Rey García Paredes, CMF is a Claretian Missionary, a re-nowned theologian, a Mariologist and an expert in Consecrated Life. He is Professor of Theology of Consecrated Life at the Instituto Teológico de Vida Religiosa in Madrid, Spain (Pontifical University of Salamanca), and at the Institute for Consecrated Life in Asia (ICLA, Manila) and ICL: Institute of Consecrated Life – Sanyasa . He is also Professor of Pastoral Theology of the Sacraments at the Instituto Superior de Teología Pastoral, Madrid (Pontifical University of Salamanca). Among his books are Religious Life as a Parable of the Kingdom: Theology of Religious Life (9 booklets); Teología de las formas de vida cristiana (3 volumes); Teología fundamental de los Sacramentos; Iniciación Cristiana y Eucaristía; Mariología; and “Lo que Dios ha unido”: Teología del Matrimonio.

I. CONGREGATIONS IN MISSION: GOING OUT

1. *Post-conciliar Steps*

Our Congregations have not remained stagnant in a certain historical moment. They have always taken steps forward. Let's recall:

- The discernment about our charismatic identity and our spiritual patrimony after the Second Vatican Council.
- The rediscovery of the communitarian dimension of our institutes: communities, structures and forms of leadership.
- The proposal of new missionary options from the perspective of the poorest and marginalized people.
- The person of religious at the centre: but not in an individualistic way, but intercultural, communitarian, spiritual and educational keys.
- Finally, our General Chapters highlighted fundamental aspects of our charisms from different and updated perspectives: prophetism, structural re-organization, shared charism and mission with the laity, new forms of evangelization and so on.

2. *Another Step? Which Way?*

Today, we ask ourselves: where to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the second decade of 2000? And there is a proposal that may surprise us. It all started with an initiative to have a representation at the UN, which now challenges us with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG): 17 goals, which are then deployed into 169 goals to be achieved before the year 2030.

It may seem strange and even scandalous that some missionaries, servants of the Word, like we are, question how to integrate the Sustainable Development Goals for the year 2020 of the UN into our ministries.

- *Perhaps not a few Religious — men and women — think that this issue has little or nothing to do with our charismatic ministry.* For what is specific to us is evangelization, pastoral and spiritual, the accompaniment of Christian communities and individuals; but *not the Sustainable Development Goals.* Are we not giving up our spiritual vision in favour of a secular and materialistic vision?
- Others, on the other hand, perhaps think that our greatest concern at this time should be survival in the midst of a dramatic situation: What to do

not to disappear as missionary Congregations or Institutes? Therefore, our main concern should focus on the vocation ministry and the readjustment of our communities to receive new vocations. It would be of little use to consider new horizons of mission, if the number of members decreases and the remaining religious are getting older and less prepared to raise the issue of SDGs.

- *There are also those who think that our mission is not and should not be political.* Therefore, it is not the secular and political institutions that tell us what to do. The exhortations of the Church, the exhortations of the ecclesiastical Magisterium, the evangelical proposals, the dreams of the prophets and the apocalyptic, but not the secular objectives for 2030, should be sufficient for us.
- In any case, it is also true that, in recent times, our General Chapters have tried to develop within the broad panorama of our religious charisms, all that has to do with the option for the poorest, the marginalized and discarded, the peripheries and the *Défense* of creation. The Sustainable Development Goals are found in that same line, although they are specified and concrete in multiple areas.

Some important questions arise from this proposal: to assume in our vision and Mission the SDGs of the UNO:

- Will this be the path that the Spirit offers us and asks us to continue being a “missionary Congregations going forth”?
- And if so, how can we position ourselves as Religious missionaries —women and men — before the Sustainable Development Goals?
- Will we have to integrate them into the perspective and orientation of our mission, or will we have to follow our own pace, leaving that challenge to others?

To answer these questions, I want to offer three concatenated reflections:

- Towards a believing reading of the SDGs proposals.
- The SDGs and our religious charisms.
- Proposals for the missionary reconfiguration of our Institutes.

We now turn to the second topic: which has three sections: the Objectives, their challenges and goals and reasons for hope

II. THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)

1. *The 17 Sustainable Development Goals*

The Sustainable Development Goals (Global Goals) adopted by all Member States in 2015 were and are very ambitious. They intend to mobilize all the peoples, human groups and people of this planet earth towards attitudes that contribute to eradicate poverty and protect the environment of our mother earth, because “another world is possible.”

The 17 objectives — which have a time limit of 2030 (that is, 9 years from the end of the year) — I would express them in seven verbs: finish, reduce, combat, protect, ensure, promote-favour and build:

- *Finish*: with poverty and hunger.
- *Reduce*: inequality.
- *Combat*: climate change and desertification, stop land degradation and loss of biodiversity.
- *Protect*: terrestrial ecosystems and their sustainable use, forests, oceans, seas and marine resources.
- *Ensure*: a healthy life and well-being for all and at all ages, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, quality and equitable inclusive education, and lifelong learning opportunities for all, cities and human settlements are inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable; water and sanitation for all; reliable, sustainable, modern and accessible energy for all; sustainable production and consumption standards.
- *Promote*: inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, decent work for all, peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice for all, inclusive industrialization.
- *Strengthen and build*: the means of implementation and revitalize global solidarity for sustainable development, resilient infrastructure, foster innovation and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

2. *Challenges and Goals*

Therefore, here is a universal call towards four great challenges:

- 1) ending poverty,
- 2) protecting the planet,

3) ensuring that all people enjoy peace and prosperity in 2030;

4) bringing several life-changing “zeros” to the world: poverty, hunger, AIDS, discrimination against women and girls, leaving no one behind.

And from all this, there are no less than 169 goals to be set in relation to human beings¹, the environment², the economy³ and political and social institutions⁴.

The 17 SDGs are integrated: there are three areas that are interconnected: economic, social and environmental; intervention in each of them affects the others; all areas together and harmonize in contributing to the balance between the three dimensions of sustainable development: environment, society and economy.

3. And why the word “sustainable”?

What “is not sustainable” is what leads to chaos and destruction. The “unsustainable” prophesies the catastrophe to come. The “sustainable”, on the other hand, speaks to us of precaution. And if we were to say it with theological words: what is sustainable speaks to us of “providence”, of “precaution”, of pre-vision. The capitalist madness, the immoderate desire for wealth will lead us to the destruction of the planet and the impoverishment of humanity.

Sustainability — translated into our religious language — has a lot to do with God’s Providence. Providence was understood as “continuous creation”: that is, the care of everything created. God is provident. But He is so, with our collaboration, with our “contest.” Providence is based on three elements:

- *Sustentatio*: preserve everything so that it does not fall into nothingness, into annihilation.
- *Governatio*: care in dealing with all created reality.
- *Concursus*: the confluence of various efficient causes or interactions.

Faith in providence began to fade in the 18th century. However, that way of speaking continues and reappears today with the vocabulary of “sustainability” or “sustainable.” In theological language, we should say: “Complicity with the creative and provident Spirit.”

4. Reasons for Hope

God continues to be provident through so many people of good will in our world. Therefore, there are reasons for hope because according to the key data of the SDGs, since 1990:

- More than 1 billion people have been lifted out of extreme poverty.
- Infant mortality has been reduced by more than half.
- The number of children not attending school has decreased by more than half.
- HIV/AIDS infections have fallen by almost 40% (since 2000).

To achieve these objectives, **everyone's** contribution is needed: creativity, knowledge, technology, financial resources. And in those “**all**” the Church and of course **our Congregations in Mission** must be found.

After the previous reflections, it is necessary to take one more step —the third part —, which I title: Towards a believing and religious reading of the “SDGs”. And in this reflection, I include two subsections: Attention to the signs of the times, We disciples-missionaries in this context.

III. TOWARDS A BELIEVING AND RELIGIOUS READING OF THE “SDGS”

Now we can ask ourselves the question: can the SDGs be integrated into the mission of the Church and in the Mission of our Institutes?

1. Attention to the Signs of the Times

Jesus directs us to the Pharisees and Sadducees to discern the signs, when they asked Jesus for a sign (Mt 16:1-4) of the times. Pope Saint John XXIII — when convening the Second Vatican Council — said: “We make Je-sus’ recommendation on the need to recognize our own signs of the times”⁵

And, in continuity, the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council invited us to “scrutinize the signs of the times, to interpret them in the light of the Gospel and to recognize and understand the world in which we live — their desires and dreams in the context of their dramatic characteristics — to respond with an intelligible language to each generation”; and in n. 11, the Constitution added that the Holy Spirit fills the universe and also impels the people of God to discern in events the true signs of the presence of God’s plans ⁶.

If now we look at the social Magisterium of the Church, and especially Pope Francis (the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* and the encyclical *Laudato Si* and *Fratelli Tutti*, we see that there is an admirable harmony between the SDGs and the contemporary ecclesial magisterium.

2. We, Religious-Missionary-Disciples in This Context

We, as missionary disciples, are nourished by the light and strength of the Holy Spirit; and thanks to the Spirit, we can distinguish what is the fruit of the Kingdom of God and what contradicts the contemporary plans of God. Therefore, we want to let ourselves be carried away by the movement of the Spirit for good and reject the spirits of evil.

With the passage of the post-conciliar years, we have understood that the signs of the times are not only the signs of God in our time, but also and above all “the signs of the Spirit.” And everything is born, from the conviction that the Holy Spirit is the great protagonist of the Mission of God, after the Mission of Jesus. The Spirit of Jesus and the Father speaks all languages, is present in all human beings, “speaks through the prophets,” also of prophetic human groups that proclaim that another world is possible.

This is the prophecy of the Spirit that now challenges us from a place as qualified as the United Nations in its Sustainable Development Goals. They enable us to dream of a humanity without hunger, without poverty, without discrimination against women, without deterioration of the environment (seas, rivers, waters, air). Are not these the new signs of the Spirit that guides us towards the plans of God the Creator? Is it not a sign of the Spirit that instead of making proposals for world war, the world proposal — endorsed by so many nations — is a proposal not only for peace, but also for the emergence of a “new” world, without poverty, without hunger, without discrimination, with an increasingly beautiful, clean and a caring planet?

It says that “dreaming the impossible” comes from the unforeseeable. And in this horizon, we religious ask ourselves — already on the threshold of a new time — can we reinterpret our charismatic mission in the light of contemporary ecclesial Magisterium and the sustainable development goals? How to configure our missionary service as Witnesses and Messengers of the Joy of the Gospel in this new context?

IV. NEW MISSION PERSPECTIVES

If the description we have made so far is appropriate, the truth is that — wherever necessary — we must re-invent ourselves as charismatic and missionary groups and congregations.

Today we hear repeated slogans: “Save the Children”, “Save the world”, “Save the planet”, “Save hospitality”, etc. The word “salvation” is being recovered. For

us, religious, it is an opportunity that the Spirit is granting us: “Save the world”, “another society is possible”.

To measure up to the signs of the Spirit in our time, I would dare to make the following points:

1. The Change of Era and Its Demands

Today there is talk of a change of time that entails a new awareness of the human being, a new ethos for a more human future and the necessary new vision in the mission.

- *A new consciousness:* A growing awareness that we are “human species” is being imposed on humanity. The pandemic that we are suffering shows us that we are “human species.” Human consciousness is expanding. Today we speak of the four expansions of consciousness: from tribal consciousness to national consciousness, through trans-national consciousness, and reaching planetary consciousness. We are increasingly aware of our planetary citizenship. And, as a result, we promote the SDGs.
- *Towards a new ethos:* How to build a more humane and less hominid future? All the information of the different societies, ethnicities and cultures that have survived must be put at the service of society as a whole to focus critically on our planet. We need to implement the ethical practice of the human species. The 21st century has arrived with great possibilities for planetary transformation. Ethics not only encompasses the purely human realm. Our ethical obligations are much broader: they must reach the environment of the biosphere: land-option. The SDGs show us that our ethics have to do with the social field, the field of biology and genetics, the ecological field. Our ethical responsibility now extends not only to the contemporary human generation, but above all, to future generations and to the future of our planet.
- *The space of global education:* it becomes for us a great mission laboratory, where we experiment and verify the validity of our pastoral and missionary actions. We must acknowledge our failure to transform the life and worldview of many members of the Church. And yet, we now recognize that it is up to us, in this new phase of human history, to be a relevant and necessary vehicle for a “transformative discipleship that responds to the new phase of human consciousness.” The Church has been given the mandate to “make disciples” (Mt 28:18-20).

- *At the service of a new citizenship:* talking about “planetization” is also about world citizenship. The dream of the “global village” of the “common house” can become true. We use more and more terms that remind us of it: ecology, economy, ecumenism, and also city, politics, civilization. The Encyclicals *Lumen Fidei* and in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* speak of a new citizenship, a new model of society⁷. We also feel called to raise the mission in a context of respect for and dialogue with secular institutions and to re-nounce dogmatic or presumptuous attitudes.

2. Are We Ready? The Vision: with the “Seven Eyes of the Spirit”

It is not easy to exercise the art of proclaiming the Gospel in a changing world for which we do not yet feel prepared. We evangelize by being ourselves evangelized through the Spirit who acts in others and through others. This means our protagonist exclusivity is over. The mission is no longer so much *ad gentes* as *inter gentes*, it is not intransitive, but transitive.

Mission in this new context requires us to go back to the origins of the Church, the New Testament, and to recover: the apocalyptic vision of the Spirit, the theology of creation, and a new ritual or cosmic liturgy.

- *The apocalyptic vision of the Spirit:* Revelation 5:6 tells us about the seven eyes of the Lamb which are the seven spirits of God sent to all the earth. The Holy Spirit is here seen as the “perfect vision.” It is the Spirit among us, on earth on mission. And to participate in it we also need the “total,” “perfect” vision: nobody has it. We have to share — and the more the better — our limited visions. Without vision, mission is blind and the leaders also blind! What is the use of striving, if we do not know why, or what for, or where? What is the use of a repetitive mission, simply programmed by our short visions, that is exercised in the dark and without transforming capacity? Therefore, our great challenge is how to connect today with the Spirit of God. We need a conversion to Pneumatology. Grace will come to us through visionary people who sometimes don’t belong in our circles. Other times they are among us. You have to listen to them and discern the Spirit that encourages. The Spirit has “seven eyes” and acts throughout the earth⁸.
- *The theology of creation:* the theology of redemption has prevailed among us. That is why we have talked a lot about sin, we have talked about salvation and condemnation, and divided the human community into human beings “in God’s grace” and “human beings in sin.” The theology of creation opens up new horizons for us and leads us to a much more encompassing ethic.

We need to get into eco-theology. The encyclical *Laudato Si'* has shown us the way.

- *The new rituals or the cosmic liturgy*: the liturgy, our liturgy also has to be re-invented in a new era. It is not a question of losing our great tradition, but it is about finding new ways of making the Liturgy a place of encounter, where the theology of creation speaks, where the new consciousness is expressed more vigorously, where a community is created not only local, or individualistic, but creative communities. We already know that rituals generate communities. We need liturgies where the “great spiritual connection” and cosmic take place.

And this concludes my reflection. I believe that the SDGs offer us a great opportunity to better reconfigure that missionary process that has been shaping our mission in the world. We need a “pastoral and missionary conversion” that *Evangelii Gaudium* asks of us, but also “paths” and “processes” to reach it⁹. The SDGs offer us the opportunity to re-think and re-invent ourselves in this new era that is launching us towards the year 2030.

Endnotes

¹ It is about the urgent improvement in health, education, justice, quality of life.

² It is about its preservation and conservation, protection of forests and biodiversity, sustainable use of environmental resources and creation of effective action projects against climate change.

³ It is about how to use natural resources so that they are not depleted: how to act on the production and management of waste, energy consumption, etc.

⁴ The SDGs call for your serious commitment to implement this project.

⁵ *Humanae salutis*, Apostolic Constitution of Saint John XXIII convening the Second Vatican Council.

⁶ GS, 4.

⁷ Cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 50.

⁸ “Then I saw standing in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures and the elders a Lamb that seemed to have been slain. He had seven horns and seven eyes (ὀφθαλμοὺς ἑπτὰ); these are the seven] spirits of God (ἑπτὰ πνεύματα τοῦ θεοῦ) sent out into the whole world. (ἀπεσταλμένα ἐἰς πᾶσαν τὴν γῆν)”.

⁹ It is about how to use natural resources so that they are not depleted: how to act on the production and management of waste, energy consumption, etc.

FOLLOWING CHRIST 'AT A DISTANCE': SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THE GROWING MEDIOCRITY IN FIDELITY AND COMMITMENT AMONG THE CONSECRATED

Babu Sebastian, CMF

The recent document¹ of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life on fidelity and perseverance was a response to the haemorrhage of the departures from the Institutes of Consecrated Life that does not seem to decline yet. Such a document has been necessitated by the reality of growing instances of infidelity and lack of perseverance of vocations in consecrated and priestly life. In many cases, abandonment takes place after years of adequate training and religious formation, or after many years of devoted and faithful work in the mission of the institute. While this is the case with those leaving the institute, what is even more worrying is the growing tendency to live a mediocre lifestyle among some who choose to remain in the institute, which is also responsible for the difficulties they experience with fidelity, commitment, and perseverance. Although they appear to be content being that way, settled down to a life of comfort and compromises, without passion for excellence, integrity, and commitment, yet, at a much deeper level, they do experience dissatisfaction, frustration, an overwhelming sense of spiritual depletion and inner emptiness. An inquiry into why many consecrated persons end up living lives tainted with mediocrity and compromised integrity would reveal several factors, among which are the following: failure to construct a solid personal and religious identity, lack of internalization of vocational values and of any significant ideals in life, weakening of one's life of faith, inadequate identification with the vocational project, secularization of the modern society and relativisation of absolutes and ideals, difficulty to live in the prospective of distant future, struggle experienced in the structuring of desire, a poorly formed conscience, inadequate vocational motivation, and the individual's psychodynamics. This article is an attempt to examine the problem of mediocrity

Fr. Babu Sebastian CMF, is a Claretian missionary from Kerala (India) presently working in Rome. He has several years of experience of teaching and working in the area of psychology and formation. He holds Licentiate and Doctoral degrees in Depth Psychology from the Institute of Psychology of the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome. At present, he is part of the teaching faculty of the Institute of Psychology and of St. Peter Favre Centre of the Gregorian University, and of Claretianum - Institute of Theology of Consecrated Life of the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome. He may be contacted at babucmf@gmail.com

among the consecrated, looking at some of its causes and what may be done to help so that such persons can live their life of consecration with greater conviction, joy, passion, integrity, and commitment.

The Nesters in Consecrated Life

L.M. Rulla and colleagues, in their extensive research² on the motivation of religious in entering and leaving the vocation, concluded that a sizeable percentage of the consecrated fall into the category of *nesters* — those who persevere in their vocation but who are less favourably disposed to internalizing vocational values and to progressing in their vocational commitment. They have built for themselves a comfortable cocoon within the religious institution and seek gratification of their vocationally inconsistent needs such as the need for affective dependency, for sexual gratification, for exhibition, for aggression, for harm avoidance, shame avoidance and so on. The number of consecrated persons who fall into this category seems to be on the rise as the various cases of scandals and mediocre life witness of many religious reveal. It may also be postulated that the declining number of vocations to religious life has also to do with the mediocre life-witness of many consecrated persons which fail to inspire or convince the young aspirants. Regrettably, some of the ones who choose to leave the religious institutes are ideal persons who should, in fact, have remained within, while those who should have left for the good of the Institute and of the Church continue to stay on enjoying a life composed of compromised integrity and mediocrity. Those who do not leave but choose to stay on they have made themselves a comfortable nest in religious life without the cost of integrity and commitment.

It is worthwhile to notice in this context the image of the apostle Peter following Jesus ‘at a distance’ after the latter’s arrest at Gethsemane³. In choosing to follow Christ at a distance, when the master is in serious trouble, Peter, on the one hand, feels smug that he has not fled unlike the other disciples after the arrest, and yet he is cautious enough not to follow Jesus too close lest he should also be arrested and perhaps tortured like the master. In the next scene, he is seen sitting by the fireside to comfort himself in the warmth while his master faces an unjust trial and possible torture ahead. Peter here seems to represent the typical consecrated person who has settled down to a life of comfort, compromises and of mediocrity in one’s religious vocation, which seems to be a tragic and sad finale to what started off as a passionate love affair with the master full of promises of love, of sacrifice and of lifelong commitment. Like Peter, one may console self by saying, “After all, I have not abandoned Jesus as I still remain a religious, although I follow him now at a *safe and comfortable distance!*”

Lack of Strong Ideals in the Self to Motivate the Person to Take Risks, Bear with Difficulties and Commit for the Longer Run

Many young persons today refrain from making lifelong commitments because they have not yet discovered something attractive enough to give all their life to and they are full of insecurities regarding the risks involved in such an enterprise. This points to a lack of strong and motivating ideals in their ideal self. This lack of maturation happening even in young adults can perhaps explain the indecision and uncertainty regarding long term commitments in them. In the phenomenon of prolonged adolescence, which is increasingly becoming a reality in our times, there is an unconscious transfer of the attributes and privileges of the life of the adolescent to the adult age without having to take responsibility for one's life and commitments. The perception that any sense of permanent belonging to anyone or even to an institution curtails on human freedom has led to the phenomenon of liquid and non-permanent fidelity where one does not feel committed to anyone or anything forever. Regrettably, there are also consecrated persons who are not excited or passionate about anything anymore. It is as if they have no more fire in their hearts to impel them to aspire for something bigger than themselves or leave their comfort zones. They have no great ideals to live by to motivate them, to encourage them to embrace risks, make sacrifices and spend their lives for a noble cause. One problem with lack of strong ideals in the structure of the self is that one easily becomes a coward and tries to be very protective of one's interests, space, and concerns, unwilling to risk anything anymore in life. As can be expected, one then tends to become easily bored, aimless and feeling depleted within. The person becomes a settler, or a nester satisfied with the minimum and having no great expectations, resigned to a mediocre and boring existence.

The culture in which we live exalts the ideal of immediate gratification of all desires. This does not help the individual to appreciate the positive long-term consequences for self and others in choosing to delay immediate gratification of one's needs and to engage in activities or missions which require patience, sacrifice, determination, perseverance, and endurance. The ideals that still seem to attract the person are that of self-preservation at all costs and of personal comfort, both of which are egocentric in nature and do not invite the person to go beyond oneself to something or Someone bigger than the self. The mediocre religious is a person in whose heart love has become spent and there is barely little left to rekindle the individual to feel passionate and motivated about anything. It is as if the person experiences a state of existential paralysis. The incapacity to love anyone or anything other than oneself makes life even more boring and exponentially increases one's sense of loneliness.

The Weakening of One's Life of Faith

Those living a mediocre commitment also experience a weakening of their life of faith. Events of crisis at a personal or institutional level which are painful and difficult to accept in one's life, are moments to trust deeper in God, and yet, some consecrated easily lose heart and, instead of turning to God for strength and direction, they choose to rely on their own inadequate resources, only to end up spiritually depleted and feeling hopeless. In such moments of spiritual and psychological vulnerability, other idols tend to occupy one's attention and the experience of the sense of spiritual alienation intensifies even further, taking the religious in crisis of faith to possible cycles of addictive behaviour and to imprudent and hurried decisions even to leave one's vocation. There is obviously an existential unease in the mediocre and compromised life that they live which slowly permeates into every ambit of life such as relationships with confreres, superiors and so on, leading to difficulties in community life⁴. Pope Francis refers to the spiritual unease involving mediocrity in the following manner:

There is a dangerous kind of sleep: it is the slumber of mediocrity. It comes when we forget our first love and grow satisfied with indifference, concerned only for an untroubled existence. Without making an effort to love God daily and awaiting the newness he constantly brings, we become mediocre, lukewarm, worldly. And this slowly eats away at our faith, for faith is the very opposite of mediocrity: it is ardent desire for God, a bold effort to change, the courage to love, constant progress. Faith is not water that extinguishes flames, it is fire that burns; it is not a tranquilizer for people under stress, it is a love story for people in love! That is why Jesus above all else detests lukewarmness (cf. Rev 3:16). God clearly disdains the lukewarm.⁵

The consecrated person who carries on with a lethargic existence suffers a sense of spiritual depletion and deep void in his soul. It is as if nothing is inspiring anymore. There is no passion in his soul to feel interested in anything worthwhile. It is as if his soul is frozen and still from disuse and neglect over the years. Some may even show a certain dislike and even abhorrence to anything that is spiritual.

Failure to Construct a Solid Personal and Religious Identity

Identity is the modality with which an individual experiences oneself in relation to self, others and it mirrors the organization and contents of one's inner world. An inner experience of a stable and integrated self and of others is at the root of a subjective perception of a cohesive self. The ability to tolerate the inevitable ambivalence of positive and negative qualities present in the self and others is important to attain and maintain a stable sense of self identity. On the other hand,

disturbances in the felt sense of identity brings one to an unstable experience of self and others, so much so that one does not have the sensation of possessing a cohesive sense of self⁶. This makes the person trapped in an unstable mode of perceiving self and others along extremes of either positivity or negativity. The disturbances felt at the level of identity affects the capacity of the person to engage in work, study, or other activities fruitfully. Other areas affected involve the inability to regulate self-esteem; the experience of others which is not stable and integrated where one's ability to understand and assess others in depth apart from their transitory behaviour is compromised; the use of primitive defence mechanisms; defects in the formation of a well-developed superego (moral and ethical values/conscience); presence of good ideals to motivate and regulate one's behaviour; rigidity or flexibility in the adaptive responses to stress; management of impulses of aggression and sexuality, etc⁷. All of these combined create vulnerabilities in the experience of oneself, in one's ability to relate to others in a healthy manner and in the capacity of the person to remain committed to one's promises and long-term goals.

The crisis of fidelity and the phenomenon of widespread mediocrity in consecrated life is also connected to the crisis of identity and to the crisis of belongingness to institutions. A wrong understanding of personal freedom that relativizes a sense of bonding guided by rules has undermined the role of mediation of institutions and of rules and has exalted the sense of personal freedom characterized by immediacy and spontaneity. In fact, the mediation role of institutions and of rules of consecrated life encourage us to regard ourselves as brothers and sisters guided by the bond of fraternity and to strive for the common good guided by common rules⁸.

Apart from the question of a stable and solid personal identity, it is also important to construct a solid sense of one's religious identity as priests and as consecrated men and women. Those having difficulty in the construction of a solid personal identity may also find trouble in the creation of a solid religious identity where one has internalized vocational ideals and values and strives to live them daily to the best possible manner. Vulnerabilities in the construction of one's personal and religious identities can make things worse even for the willing religious to stay committed and productive in the long run.

Decentred and Distracted Lives

Fr. Adolfo Nicolas, the Jesuit ex-superior general, in one of his posthumously published papers, observed that what distinguished the classic saints of the Christian spiritual tradition was their ability to be totally centred on Christ. They were conquered by the fire of the Holy Spirit and by the style of life of Christ and

they chose to remain there fully centred, experiencing the depth of the centre and building up their life around that centre⁹. Those living a life of mediocrity are in fact, distracted and decentred people. They are distracted by everything as they lack focus and a centre to hold themselves together and around which they can build their vocational and religious identity. Instead of being centred on Christ, they seem to be centred on little else if not themselves, passing from one fleeting distraction to the next in an existence devoid of sense, purpose, and motivation. Religious life at times risks being understood as a matter of doing than of being, of identity. If one fails to construct a solid religious identity within the religious vocation, then one may identify with the role and with what one does. If at a point that role is removed or that job is taken away, the person has nothing to hold on to. To persevere in fidelity, one needs to discover the beauty of the choice made for God. This requires a basic openness in his conscience towards theocentric values and ideals, and a basic level of human maturity. If people do not fall in love with God and his mission, it becomes difficult to make the fundamental option for God. When one can make the fundamental option for God, it helps one in staying faithful. It becomes the pole around which all his choices, action and intentions get built. It is like saying: I *know* what I want (intellect); I *feel* it is good for me (heart) and I decide to go for it (will). It then will have a monopolizing force over the other inferior motivations which may be present in human heart. The problem with consecrated life today is that many religious have not yet made the fundamental option for God, nor have they fallen in love with God and the vocational project. This can make them tend to settle down for a life of mediocre commitment, with occasional lapses in some cases and with more serious and frequent lapses in others.

Secularization of the Modern Society and Relativisation of Absolutes and Ideals

We live in a liquid culture and society where there are no more permanent or stable values or norms. Add to this, the problem of lack of good role models to idealize. All that the young persons of our times have got to imitate are those celebrities of the world of different types of entertainment and sports who are not a modicum of virtues at all. We can also add the issue of non-permanency of commitments where relationships are short lived, and people easily tend to get in and out of relationships. The freedom 'from' (awareness of one's identity and individuality and of one's limits) has taken over the freedom 'for' (the capacity for commitment.) If we retain that everything is valid and possible, at the end nothing is really valid anymore as the values then tend to annul each other's validity — this leads to a sense of nullity, meaninglessness. As a result, the person facing such a dichotomy of values would live a life of indecision and non-commitment. In

addition to the existential sense of fragmentation, today's young persons also are characterized by the tendency to have limited frustration tolerance threshold, and tendency to immediate gratification and impatience. This makes them less capable of dealing with failures, loneliness. The French author Vincent Ayel¹⁰, back in the 1970's spoke of the question of fidelity in an era of provisional certainties. The passage from a society based on a model of rules and order where each one had a specific role to play and knew how to do it to one based on the model of a project where each one has to seek a role and space to insert oneself. We are witnessing the slow death of a civilization of habits to which we are used to and so each one is forced to invent one's course in life.

Inadequate Identification with the Vocational Project

The quality and degree of one's identification with the vocational project is the measure of the ability of the person to love, to give oneself and to be constant and passionate about one's life and mission in the consecrated vocation. Those who end up living lives of mediocrity are those who have not yet identified themselves with their vocational commitment and project of life. Perhaps they are so scared about the costs, risks and sacrifices involved in the commitment and so tend to get settled to half-hearted commitment and to a life of compromises. Many consecrated persons are not fully aware of the practical and potential implications of each of the vows which they profess at the time of making them and some tend to get easily disheartened by failures, rejections, pain, and sacrifice. It is in daily life that one comes to realize the potential struggles involved in living each vow fully and two possible outcomes may ensue for those who choose to persevere: one either embraces the struggles involved in living the vows with commitment and passion and remains open to God's grace and assistance or one relies on the force of will power and in trying to face the overwhelming struggle involved in staying truly committed, feels discouraged by frequent lapses and ends up in a life of compromised integrity and mediocrity. The tendency to settle down to a life of mediocre commitment is a tendency to choose security and comfort over stress, struggle, and pain of renunciations. The focus and attention of the consecrated with a mediocre commitment get centred on mundane pursuits and superficial interests such as entertainment, art, building monuments, sports, affective adventures, thirst for power, excessive socializing, absorption in the use of internet, social media, etc. In problematic community life situations, the world of internet and social media can become an easy refuge for anyone. The digital world has its benefits but also inherent risks in the sense that one can easily get engrossed in its fold and eventually lose the ability for clear and objective reasoning because it is possible to see and

hear only what one wants and what that digital world has to offer. Aside from the potential for creating dependence on its contents, the internet also opens the possibility for creating relationships that are virtual and not healthy or realistic. This way one risks becoming sterile, empty, and caught up in a complex system of evasions and compromise of integrity and a paralysis of the will to change and be better.

The Ego's Fears about an Unknown God Who Wants Everything

A God who demands nothing less than total and unflinching commitment frightens our fragile egos. The ego or our false self sees this as a loss and as an invasion that threatens its instinct for self-preservation and its vulnerable defences. The ego experiences intense anxiety about being overwhelmed and taken over by an unknown force which here is God who demands total surrender and unflinching dedication and many sacrifices. In the process, the image of a loving and merciful God who gently invites the soul to a passionate love relationship gets totally distorted and displaced by a tyrannical and invasive image of God. It is human nature to feel inspired by God's call but is also part of human nature to calculate the possible costs and offer a half-hearted yes. Mediocrity does not only affect those who give the half-hearted yes to God but also those who respond to God's call with generosity and enthusiasm in the initial years. Many consecrated persons find difficulty to maintain the initial passion and enthusiasm for the commitment after a few setbacks and they slowly slip into the terrain of mediocrity and choose to stay right there.

Difficulty to Live in the Prospective of Distant Future

In the face of anxieties and uncertainties about the unknown future, many tend to go for making a prudent decision instead of a firm decision as they are unwilling to risk the uncertain. The culture of immediate gratification, of instinct dominated life leaves the person incapable of committing self to anything in the long term. They are afraid of responsibility and tend to flee from it. When a person lives constantly in the search for gratification of needs in the present, by using the criterion of (*I like, I do not like over I choose this because it is important in itself or I don't choose because it is not important in itself*), rational thought gets replaced by emotiveness and one becomes incapable of projecting self in the future and of living in the perspective of long-term objectives. It is also indicative of the post-modern culture where objective criteria for choice of what is important in itself gets replaced by sentimental criteria of, *I like, I don't like, it suits me, it doesn't suit me, I feel like doing, I don't feel like doing something*. Even an attempt to define oneself in such a culture is an attempt at self-definition based on fleeting sensations which can even be contradictory. One is

more likely to choose the immediately available experience and engage in trials and experiments without committing to anything in particular.¹¹ This can eventually lead to lack of depth in convictions and to possible compromises with integrity leading eventually to mediocrity.

Struggle Experienced in the Structuring of Desire

“For most of us it is easier to think about how to get what we want than to know what exactly we should want.”¹² The culture of endless consumption in which we all live presents a major threat to the structuring of desire in the human heart. The world today offers too many options to choose from, be it at the supermarket, be it on the online market, be it on TV, social media or on internet. As one faces the embarrassment of choices, the effect is a paralysis of the capacity to choose and confusion about what one really wants in life. When one’s ability to choose is compromised, one easily becomes victim of external conditioning. What we choose in some way symbolically confers value on us. We are constantly bombarded with messages that tell us of the value of things and what they can bring us. Slowly but surely, the process of constant exposure to such a world can reduce the internal spaces of discernment. The choices of modern man tend to be less and less deliberate as he is under the subtle influence of many conditioning factors. To resolve the decisional paralysis resulting from the multiplicity of choices, one tends to follow the instinct and not the reason or intellect. One thus arrives at thinking: *I choose what I like and not what is good*. The result is a person who is rendered incapable of structuring his desires and purposes well in life. Combined with other factors this can potentially lead to a life of mediocrity and compromised personal integrity.

The Attitude to Suffering and Pain in the Mediocre Religious

The mediocre religious has an antipathic relationship with any situation involving sacrifice, renunciation, suffering and pain. He is inordinately attached to comforts and pleasures that the prospect of sacrifice or pain frightens him. Thus, he would tend to avoid responsibilities or offices involving high levels of accountability and sacrifices on resources and time as much as possible. The avoidance of pain, suffering and renunciations is aimed at self-preservation at all costs. Jesus in the gospel speaks of the seed that refuses to die and bear fruit. Jesus does not speak about the physical death of the person when he uses the analogy of the seed, rather, he refers to the death to one’s false self with which people often tend to identify. The false self is intent on self-preservation and is focussed on itself. It is separated from the love of God and is a distorted version of one’s True Self that is born of and takes nourishment from divine love. Those who have misidentified themselves with their false self, resist any

prospect of change or threat to their existence in the comfort of mediocrity. They refuse to die to their false selves and remain like the grain of wheat that does not fall to the ground and die and continue with their sterile lives condemned to a joyless existence. When one gets too comfortable with one's false self and mistakes it with life, one is likely to hold onto it dearly because that is the only life one believes one has. Without a conscious connection with the deepest ground of ones being, people are unwilling to let go of their inordinate attachment to their false selves, and they would continue to live mediocre lives, worried about self-preservation like the grain of wheat that refuses to fall to the ground and die. Consecrated persons living a mediocre commitment perceive their vocation as a kind of barter system where one expects to be rewarded with compensations and comfort for all the renunciations and sacrifices one makes in taking up this style of life.

Difficulty to Face One's Truth with Honesty

The bane of mediocrity can be seen even in one's relationship with oneself where one fails to look at oneself with honesty. The fact that one has made so many compromises with integrity and lives a less committed life, also means that one refuses to see oneself with brutal honesty as God would see him. Any attempt on the part of the mediocre religious for self-reflection is likely to result in overwhelming feelings of shame and self-loathing which preclude any possibility for change or improvement. One needs to acknowledge with humility and honesty the limitations and weaknesses in one's behaviour and character without hiding them or running away from them. St. Philip Nery reportedly prayed thus: "My God, beware of Philip, else he will betray you." This calls for the need for constant watchfulness of our part, lest we fall prey to the spirit of lethargy. Mediocrity is also the result of the refusal to assume responsibility for one's duties and obligations and is simultaneously the punishment one suffers for such a refusal. The mediocre religious is lazy to engage in anything meaningfully. In him or her, the life energies are already spent, attraction to self-transcendent values is diminished, motivation to improve is lost and one enters a state of lethargic existence feeling impotent and useless, unable to reflect and be self-aware. This can potentially drive the individual on a search for external stimulation to remove the painful feeling of boredom and inner emptiness so that one may feel alive, and it opens the door to other possible vices involving sexuality, alcohol abuse, internet addiction, violence, etc. "Spiritual corruption is worse than the fall of a sinner, for it is a comfortable and self-satisfied form of blindness. Everything then appears acceptable: deception, slander, egotism and other subtle forms of self-centredness, for "even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Cor 11:14).¹³

Psychodynamics of the Individual

Lack or weakness of vocational values and the presence of strong unconscious central needs in the motivational system (such as aggression, affective dependency, sexual gratification, exhibition, etc.) that are vocationally inconsistent, and which push for gratification can make the person live a double life and eventually make the exit from the vocational journey due to the inability to bear with the tension of having to live the inconsistency on a continuous basis. We need to consider the fact that opting for consecrated life brings with it certain renunciations that are required by the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. If the person does not have strong moral and religious values and ideals in his ideal self to support his choice to renounce each time a need to gratify what has been renounced presents itself, the only support he has to resist the need is the force of his will power. And each time he says no to the need, there builds up the tension of frustration of the need, which after a while of resistance, tends to go out of control and there happens a lapse in commitment. If on the other hand, the person has strong moral and religious values and ideals which have been internalized, then in a similar situation of renunciation, in addition to the force of his will power, he has the aid of the world of ideals to support his choice to say no and stay in it even in spite of the tension of renunciation which is tolerable.

Another important area under psychodynamics has to do with the real motivation of the individual in choosing consecrated life. In the case of insufficient personal motivation, the person makes a fundamental choice of life without having discovered the true value or beauty of that choice and therefore, he cannot make a renunciation of his vocationally inconsistent needs in favour of this choice, and this would lead to creation of a disequilibrium in the psyche between frustration and gratification. If the motivation is inadequate or vocationally inconsistent, then the feeling of living a lie is likely to become strong in the person and in some cases, some choose to step out for the peace of mind and others choose to stay and live a life of mediocrity. Similarly, insufficient conviction regarding the value of the choice made to renounce, where the person accepts it as an ecclesiastical requirement to remain a consecrated person but is not convinced of its value or about its need to be taken seriously, can also lead to situations of compromised integrity and mediocrity.

Striving towards a Life Marked by Concrete Love and Fidelity

Pope Francis, while addressing the priests and religious in Poland exhorted that the life of Jesus' closest disciples is shaped by concrete love, a love marked by service and availability. The disciples do not compromise evangelization for the comforts of

the world, nor do they waste time planning a secure future, lest they risk becoming isolated and gloomy, enclosed within the narrow walls of a joyless and desperate self-centredness. Because their happiness is in the Lord, they are not content with a life of mediocrity, but burn with the desire to bear witness and reach out to others.¹⁴

One of the constant running threads across the scripture is about the relationship between God and his people characterised by constant fidelity of the former and infidelity by the latter and how such distortions in the divine-human relationship is healed by the offer of salvation. Christ is the icon of God's fidelity. Fidelity is enlivened by the encounter with the Lord and by the total dedication of the intellect, will, heart and mind of the person to the Lord. Perseverance is above all patience in bearing with any kind of suffering or difficulty to remain faithful like Christ. Perseverance in fidelity reveals one's authentic love for Christ. Perseverance calls for keeping alive the memory of one's encounter with the Lord¹⁵. So, what is fidelity? In daily life, we speak of fidelity to refer to various situations and things: the fidelity of the spouses in marriage; a faithful portrait of the person; a faithful description, a faithful memory; the faithful of a Church; the faithful dog; to be faithful to God, to the nation, to the laws, to oneself, to the traditions, to the ideals, etc. Fidelity, therefore, is a broad and flexible concept but which exists in the abstract but always in the context of a relationship to someone or something. It is like the shadow of a body. If the body is absent, there is no more shadow. It is an attitude which has continuity in time in relationship to something else. Being faithful is not the *objective* because what we desire is not just being faithful but is the *effect* of our efforts to continue to live according to our commitment. We do not give ourselves to the fidelity but to a person, to a cause or to a value. *Our continuing to give ourselves constantly is what makes fidelity a reality.* What is the relationship between commitment and fidelity? We can say that commitment precedes fidelity. We strive to be faithful to the commitments we make. Fidelity to a commitment means that commitment does not only happen in the present but will continue in time which creates fidelity. We can say however, that commitment also presupposes that there be fidelity.

Relationship between Love, Fidelity and Mediocrity

In every life that speaks of compromised integrity and mediocrity there is always a crisis of fidelity. Fidelity is the way of living love and infidelity is betrayal and absence of love. If there is no real love, there can be no genuine fidelity. When there is love, one stays faithful in temptations, trials, and difficulties no matter what. There is willingness to undergo pain and sacrifice without having to compromise. "The concept of affective freedom means and specifies that the problem of freedom is not

posed in terms of independence, but of love. Man is free not to the extent that he does not depend on anything or anyone, but to the extent that he depends on what he loves and what he is called to love.”¹⁶ Every person has the absolute need to feel loved and not feeling loved can lead to frustration. Love therefore, even before it is considered a virtue, is something that is essential to the very structure of our being, an inalienable need. All other values derive from it. Fidelity, we can say therefore presupposes that one loves the object of one's fidelity. Commitment is a process, a becoming in progress and not something achieved once and for all. It is the result of an honest search, constant renewal even during uncertainties. We need to live inspired constantly and pulled forward by the ideals and not ideas or idealisms. If there are no strong ideals pulling us forward, there is the risk of following slogans, and feeling sentiments of the moment and of eventual mediocre existence. We must have something to do, someone to love and something to look forward to with hope to remain strong and faithful. Many people do not live intentionally but by the fleeting interest of the moment. A committed consecrated person lives one's life intentionally. Definitive commitment implies an intention, an act of trust which one desires and wills to maintain. The formation in faithful perseverance requires reawakening of and exercise of a delicate inner sensitivity to respond to God's gift.

Endnotes

¹ Cf. CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, *The Gift of Fidelity and the Joy of Perseverance*, Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020.

² Cf. L.M. RULLA – J. RIDICK – F. IMODA, *Anthropology of the Christian Vocation: Existential Confirmation*, II, Rome 1989.

³ Cf. Lk 22:54

⁴ Cf. *The Gift of Fidelity and the Joy of Perseverance*, § 13.

⁵ POPE FRANCIS, *Homily from the Eucharistic Concelebration with the New Cardinals*, 29 November, 2020.

⁶ Cf. H. KOHUT – E.S. WOLF, “The Disorders of the Self and Their Treatment: An Outline”, *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 59 (1978) 413–425.

⁷ Cf. V. LINGIARDI – N. MC WILLIAMS, ed., *Psychodynamic Diagnostic Manual (PDM – 2)*, New York 2017.

⁸ Cf. *The Gift of Fidelity and the Joy of Perseverance*, § 16.

⁹ A. NICOLAS, “Dalla distrazione alla dedizione. Un invito al «Centro»”, *La civiltà Cattolica* 29 (2020). You can access at: <https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/from-distraction-to-dedication-an-invitation-to-the-center/> (accessed on 15 July 2020).

¹⁰ VINCENT AYL, *Inventare la fedeltà in un tempo di certezze provvisorie*, Torino 1978; trans. G. Papini from original *Inventer la fidélité au temps des certitudes provisoires*, Paris 1976.

¹¹ Cf. N. D. MOLIN, “Quale proposta e accompagnamento vocazionale delle giovani oggi. Per una pastorale vocazionale”, in AA.VV. *La donna religiosa in una Chiesa-comunione*, Roma 1990, 146-160.

¹² R. N. BELLAH *et al.*, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, University of California, L.A. 1985, 21.

¹³ POPE FRANCIS, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, §165.

¹⁴ Cf. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco_2016_0730_omelia-polonia-santuario-gpii.html

¹⁵ Cf. *The Gift of Fidelity and the Joy of Perseverance*, § 24-27.

¹⁶ A. Cencini, *Vita Consacrata. Itinerario formativo lungo la via di Emmaus*, Milano 1994, 103.

CLERICAL CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: VICTIMS AND VICTIMISERS

James Kannanthanam, CMF

A young priest appointed as the assistant parish priest said to me, “My boss (parish priest) does not allow me to go anywhere near children!” Another young priest was shocked to the core when the guardian of the altar-boys shouted at him, “Don’t touch the boy”. The wrong he did: he was about to help the altar-boy to put the cincture right! The examples abound on the experiences of the young priests getting frustrated and disillusioned by the restrictions imposed on them because some priests abused the minors. Manoel Delson, a Brazilian Catholic Archbishop has banned priests in his district from being alone with children. His decree prohibits priests from being in the company of children and vulnerable adults if they are not accompanied by parents or guardians.¹ One wonders with such stringent sets of guidelines and code of conducts imposed on the clerics, have we thrown away also the child with the bath water! In the issue of child abuse, then, victims are not only the ones directly affected by the abuse and the victimisers are not merely those who abused the children. Everyone is some way victimised and often inadvertently becomes victimiser.

The Primary Victims

No doubt the primary victims are the children who were abused and we know well today the agony and pain they go through and how their future is hugely affected by the abuse experience. Today we know that most of the sexual abuse survivors are affected in all dimensions of life: physical, social, psychological and spiritual. They might face anxiety disorders, depression, insomnia, amnesia, hypervigilance, self-esteem problems, and many others. Some of them even commit suicide or attempt it. When the abuse is by a priest, their faith and relationship with God are also

Fr. James Kannanthanam, CMF is a Claretian missionary presently doing ministry as Assistant Novice Master of the Claretians. After his licentiate in Psychology from the Institute of Psychology, Gregorian University, Rome, he took his doctorate in Organization Development (OD) from SAIDI, Philippines and had a post-doctoral diploma in Protection of Minors from Centre for Child Protection (CCP), Gregorian University, Rome. He also served as the Provincial of Bangalore Province of the Claretians for six years besides long years of service as novice master. He can be contacted at james.kannan@gmail.com

often affected. With the abuse, life is totally changed for the survivors. Hence no excuse of the perpetrators can absolve them totally from the heinous crimes they have committed.

At the initial stages of the upsurge of the problem, the Church did not take seriously the complaints of the victims and is accused of protecting the abusive priests. Having not listened to the victims with understanding and compassion, Church herself became a victimiser adding to the pains of the victims of abuse. As Fr. Hans Zollner points out, “Persons humiliated by sexual trauma are further injured when they are not received by Church leaders, or if received, neither listened to nor accompanied. This lack of empathetic reception of victims is sometimes called the “secondary injury.” Regrettably, the oft-times non-empathetic, self-defensive attitude of Church leaders is as harmful as the abuse itself.² We should not forget that many survivors have lost their trust and preferred to keep themselves away from the Church.

Today ‘Victims first’ is the slogan and policy that the Catholic Church officially pursues. There is no doubt that care of the victims of abuse need to be the priority of the caregivers and authorities. In the effort to protect the name and fame of the Church, many in the hierarchy failed to give sufficient attention to the care of the victims. Today most of the dioceses in countries like USA have people and facilities for the victims of abuse to have recourse. Time and again Popes of our times have advised the bishops to listen to the narratives of the pains and sufferings of the victims of clerical abuse and journey with them in their efforts to cope with the realities.

The Non-Abusive Priests as Victims

A second group who are victims of the child abuse are the priests who have done no harm to children. The priests, particularly the young ones, lost the freedom and spontaneity in relationships and eventually are deprived of satisfaction in their priestly ministry. The first priest mentioned above told me that he is so controlled that he has nothing much to do except to celebrate Mass. That is extremely frustrating for a priest who was actively involved in youth ministry in his country of origin and facing now a situation of uselessness in the new place. A priest’s satisfaction and fulfilment is in the pastoral ministry and the services he renders. When stringent rules and regulations are enforced, a priest is prevented from doing much of the good that he otherwise would have done. Who are the victimisers in this process? A Church that overly reacts and controls its own ministers? A society that looking suspiciously at all the behaviours of the priests?

The issue of clerical child abuse has created enormous consequences for the priests and priesthood itself. It is a small minority of priests who are actually involved in misconduct, though in some countries numbers look large with very rigid criteria of assessment making even natural and normal behaviours of priests interpreted as abusive. While the abuse by clergy is reprehensive and by no way justifiable, it is unfortunate that all priests have to pay a high price for the behaviours of a few. When priests are overly suspected and condemned as a species with abnormal conduct, what is at stake is not just the loss of the high social status attributed to it. It damages the dignity of priesthood and belittles the sacrifices and commitment of the majority of priests. The enormous good done by the clergy all over the world go either unacknowledged or misinterpreted.

The impact on the non-offending clergy, which is the large majority, is not only in the strain felt in their ministry to the children and youth, but also in the very perception of their identity. Their sense of honour is affected when the critics of celibacy frown at them as if they are a sort of psycho-sexually immature people who, as opportunities arise, bound to let loose the repressed libido energy on the unsuspected and vulnerable! It is not that the priests begin to evaluate themselves in this way or believe it as having an iota of truth but how it manipulates the public perception and affects the trust and comfort in their interaction with priests. “The scandals have created”, as John L. Allen Jr. says, “a terribly one-sided public narrative about the Catholic Church, and perhaps especially its priesthood.”³ The critics forget that celibates are the best examples of arriving at psycho-sexual maturity sublimating, to use Freudian terminology, the libido into most socially and spiritually meaningful purposes. The researches of Monsignor Stephen Rossetti show that priests are a happy group of people. He tells, “A central finding of this study is the extraordinarily high rates of priestly happiness and satisfaction. The findings are strong, replicable, and consistent: priests, as a group, are very happy men. They like priesthood. They are committed to it. They find much satisfaction in their lives and ministries. In fact, the satisfaction rates of priests are among the highest of any way of life or vocation in the United States”⁴. However, it can affect strikingly the public perception about the vocation to priesthood and only time will reveal whether it impacted on the number of vocations. It has become all the more challenging for the young people to choose a way of life which has lost its glamour in the sight of the public. The image of priest has plunged from holy angel to a despicable sinner. Those who respond to priestly vocation will have to stand against the discouragement coming from those who do not believe any more of its preciousness. It has become the path for the bold and those convinced of its beauty. On the positive side it can ward off those seeking priesthood for any worldly

motives including those who use it as an easy access to the objects of their perverted sexual desires.

Victimisers as Victims

Are the abusers themselves victims at the same time? Do the perpetrators get justice and right they deserve? Victims deserve our first attention. This preference should not, however, deter us from giving attention and care also for the perpetrators. While the media and the public might demonize the victimisers as heartless and want to guillotine them summarily, it does not go well with a Christian approach, nor is it reasonable response from a psychological perspective. One can easily recognize that most of the victimisers are normal and capable people barring this defect and do honest service in their fields of assignments. Most of them lament about this abusive trait in them which they fail to manage or integrate. As far as paedophilia is concerned, professionals will agree that it is a sickness and needs medical intervention. Stephen Rossetti says, “The perpetrators of child sexual abuse have committed a heinous crime. However, the current trends toward ostracizing and demonizing perpetrators are not only unchristian, it actually increases their likelihood of re-offending. We hate the sin, but we love the sinner. We despise what molesters have done, but we try to rehabilitate offenders, making them productive members of our society whenever possible.”⁵

Many of the priests who were taken out of pastoral care and confined to solitary life, express that they are too harshly treated. According to the statistics, more than half of the accused had done only one-time mistake. One may rightly ask whether it is justice to punish someone for life-time for a single mistake! With “Zero-tolerance” policy of Catholic Bishops’ Conference of USA, if one is definitively proved to have a single case of abuse, he should be out of the pastoral ministry. The Church which was so lenient earlier to overlook multiple abuses has now swung the pendulum to the opposite! But is it a reasonable and Christian attitude? Jesus condemned in no uncertain terms those who harm children. “If anyone causes one of these little ones — those who believe in me — to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea” (Mt 18:6). Causing one of these “little ones” to sin is a grave offence according to Jesus. Any misuse of sexuality is condemned by Paul in strongest terms when it appears among believers. He tells, “Among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality... these are improper for God’s holy people” (Eph 5:3). Paul asserts that people with such things as sexual immorality, homosexual behaviours shall not inherit the kingdom of God (1Cor 6:9-10) and they shall have no place in the Church (1Cor 5:1-5). Paul would not be certainly less harsh with child abusers!

But did not Jesus show mercy to the offenders? To the sinners who expressed repentance Jesus was kind and forgiving. To the woman caught in adultery he said, “I too do not condemn you, go now and leave your life of sin” (Jn 8:11). To the repented thief, Jesus was generous to offer the kingdom of God, telling, “You will be with me today in paradise” (Lk 23:43). Once repented and came back, the prodigal son is welcomed back unconditionally with compassion (Lk 15:20). Paul who wanted the sexual offender to be sternly treated mellows down and tells, “The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore to reaffirm your love for him... in order that Satan will not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes” (2Cor 2: 6-11). Punishment for Paul was to gain the sinner back to the Church and putting him out permanently is playing into the schemes of the Satan. I think we have clear guidelines in dealing with offenders in these instances even when the sins are very serious in nature. From a Christian biblical perspective, any sinner deserves forgiveness.

Now from a psychological perspective too, to deal with a one-time offender and multiple and compulsive offender in the same manner is unreasonable. One-time offence can come from various situations and the person can repent and find the right path much easier than somebody with strong impulses and has incidences of multiple abuse. A multiple-offender may have serious neuropsychological impairment, or they may suffer from significant personality problem or some might be paedophiles, a pathological problem. So they all need different types of treatment. Indeed, those chronic offenders who have no control over their acts are to be kept out of ministry. But should we do the same with those who had an incident of abuse many years before and have changed and has been living an honest life thereafter? Is it not, then, some of the abusers are really victims of harsh and unjust treatment from the Church? Is the Church overacting because of its fears of the media and financial concerns?

Researches show that most of the victims live a normal life without any impact of the abuse.⁶ But there is a tendency to attribute the reason for all the difficulties and problems of the victims of abuse on the abuser. This is another victimisation of the accused. We should not forget that the problems of the victims might come from many other sources too — their personality disorders, dysfunctional family background, other traumatic experiences, and many others. To accuse somebody who sexually abused for every problems of failure in life of the victims and demand compensation is hardly justifiable.

Victimisers are of different kinds. A minor group of the priests who abuse are paedophiles — about 4 percentage according to the statistics.⁷ Some others are with psychological problems like being sexually compulsive, Neuropsychologically impaired, Narcissistic or Sociopathic, emotionally immature, “Psychosocially Delayed Homosexuals”, etc. About 1/3-2/3 of abusing priests were themselves abused in childhood and so they are victims turned into victimisers. Hence most of the victimising priests need treatment than punishment. They either inherit a social problem or they are affected by sickness like in any other case of illness. When the victimisers are priests all these considerations are often overlooked.

Clerical abuse captures public attention and notoriety. The percentage of priests abusing children is less than fathers abusing children. Yet a father’s abuse goes unnoticed or easily excused while a priest’s abuse receives public scrutiny and severe condemnation. The differential considerations may disappear only when the public mind-set changes to accept that priests are equally susceptible to social influences and pathologies as anyone else. One will have to accept that all the moral formation of many years may go untouched for some people and Church or science have no fool-proof techniques to detect or screen out potential abusers.

Hierarchy as Victims

In dealing with the abuse cases, many of the bishops were accused of protecting their priests than caring the victims. Media accuses them of ‘cover up.’ Often it has been an uncharitable expression used against them without considering their good intentions. Most of the bishops have done what parents would do when a son is found abusive. Parents would not generally take the case to the court first but will deal with the problem trying to protect the son’s and family’s dignity and name. The bishops who in the place of the parents, if done similarly in the case of their priests with a problem, they cannot be accused of being villains. It is from this perspective some bishops when accused of their failure to report to legal authorities responded that they were first and foremost shepherds and not policemen. Moreover, to have believed the priests who claimed to have changed and vowed never to repeat the abusive acts, cannot be considered a great mistake of the hierarchy at a time when there was no reason to suspect their sincerity or adequacy of the means they used for reforming their lives. Of course, they did not access adequately the potential danger of such priests being transferred to a different parish. In the beginning stages of the outbreak of child abuse cases, nobody was in fact aware of the depth of the seriousness of the problem. Even in the Spotlight, the film that accuses of inadequate response from the bishop acknowledges that before the priests were transferred,

they were sent for treatment. The psychologists themselves were unaware that with a short-term therapeutic work the problem cannot be solved and did not warn the authority about the problems that might persist in their clients and the potential danger. If the bishops thought that the priests with the problem could be reinstated or transferred to another place after receiving the treatment, it was thought as an appropriate action. Hence to attribute purposeful negligence and accuse prelates of promoting abuse, served only to inflame public anger over them and give an unjust verdict. Demanding to put the confidential materials about the priests to public, the legal systems too played into the hands of the vested interests. With the sensations and passions aroused around the issue, the Church found herself at the receiving end of ire and calumny. In the effort to contain the damage, some prelates had to pay the price. If they were the victims, media and society were acting as victimisers! The bad name that the bishops gained also affected their credibility among people and acceptance of their message to the faithful. When they instruct on Church's position on any issue, they hear the negative comments like, in the words of one bishop, "Media coverage of clergy sexual abuse has made it challenging to present or defend Church teachings in my diocese." Another bishop says, "Sometimes people use it as a club to bear you over the head about any issue you talk about. Whether it's care for the poor, immigration, or whatever the issue, there will be some people who will throw that back at you and say, 'You know what? You should take care of your own [abusive] priests.'"⁸ When bishops are not taken seriously by the people, the Church loses its power of authority it used to have to teach and instruct. The loss of moral authority is indeed an unfortunate side-effect of the clerical child abuse. Indeed, the hierarchy is a victim of unjust treatment.

Victim Church

The Catholic Church was definitely one of the victims of clerical child abuse in the way she was accused of her complicity with the perpetrators and her inadequate response to the problem. Pope St. John Paul II himself has indicated it when he said, "It has been very damaging in the life of the Church and has become an obstacle to the proclamation of the Gospel."⁹ The Church has borne the brunt of the problem in many ways: her dignity and credibility are questioned, suffered financial loss even to the point of bankruptcy of some dioceses, her charitable works are affected, the non-offending majority of the clerics are forced to bear the ignominy, and caused many faithful to get disillusioned and leave the Church. The stringent measures taken by the Church in an effort to show seriousness of her commitment to root out the abuses inadvertently also caused the priests to lose their spontaneity and freedom in their relationships and ministry.

For centuries priests were trusted and respected and Church was held in high esteem. All of a sudden, the media has projected a different picture of priests and the Church. Movies highlighting the misconducts of the clergy and bishops did a great harm to the Catholic Church of her credibility. Some of the comments I noticed in the media were as if the Church was promoting abuses! Some even warned, “Keep children away from Church and clergy!” Many critics have no qualms in accusing all clergy as perverts and branding the Catholic Church as a corrupt institution to be annihilated. They would not recognize or want to acknowledge that most of the child abuses are happening not in the Church or by Church authorities but in their own backyards. It is within the family most abuses occur. Those who were drawing swords against the clergy did not at the same time raise a finger against the over sexualized secular culture that conceived the problem of abuse. Those who did elaborate survey of the abuses of priests with passion and almost a sense of vengeance did not show the same enthusiasm when it came to expose the abuses rampant in the families. The films like *Spotlight* celebrated the immaturities and sickness of some of the clergy and the pitfalls of the hierarchy in dealing adequately with the issue to incite public anger not just over a few priests but the entire Church itself. The doors of the hell were thrown open and those who awaited for a chance had the prey before them standing helpless and clueless! The legal and administrative system in some countries colluded with such forces of the netherworld to give opportunities for lawyers looking for quick and easy money and projected the Catholic Church as obsolete and sick.

The Globe investigation team of Boston claimed that they were exposing “Betrayal of children’s innocence, of parents’ trust, of priestly vows, of bishops’ responsibilities, of the Church’s basic tenets...Shocking; massive cover-up; rather than protect its most vulnerable members, the Church had been putting them in harm’s way; placing a premium on protecting the Church’s reputation at the expense of its victims.”¹⁰ Major newspapers gave wide publicity for the abuses of the Catholic priests. They had reporters in place trying to tie the isolated, regional episodes into a national story, presumably one of scandalous proportions. Secular press attempted to portray the Church as hypocritical, as an organization preaching morality and providing sanctuary to perverts. Not only in USA but worldwide public sentiments were raised against Church and media did not spare the opportunity to bring Church down of its pedestal. The Catholic Church was maligned and hostile media and enemies of the Church tried to project Vatican and the whole institution of the Catholic Church as sickly and vicious. Does Church deserve such a treatment? Can the Church be accused of providing safe haven for the abusers? Was

she not victimised? Why so much hostility towards the Catholic Church? Could it be, as some defenders of the Church argued, that the supporters of abortion and gay marriages found an opportunity to take revenge on Catholic Church for her staunch stand against them? In so far as the Church failed to attend to the victims of abuse and was more concerned about its name and fame, and failed to access the harm in keeping the abusers in pastoral care situations, the authorities did, indeed, make mistakes. But to attribute such responses as calculated and malicious is unwarranted.

Impact on Ministry and Proclamation

Apart from the loss of name and fame of the Catholic Church which the Popes graciously advised to ignore while dealing with abuse cases and to give primary attention to the victims, we forget its impact on the mission of the Church. When the apostles prevented the children coming to Jesus, considering them as an unnecessary disturbance to his more serious ministry to ‘the adults’, he intervened and said, “Let the children come to me” (Mt 19:14). He called them to him and blessed them. The ministry to the children is an important part of Jesus’ focus and attention. They are to be attended to by the Church as well. The attention to the children given by the recent Popes goes in line with this model of Jesus. This should be the model also for the clergy who should make Jesus present today to the children. They should be welcoming and blessing children as Jesus did. Having lived a few years in Philippines, I found how meaningfully this ministry was expressed there. After every Holy Mass children surround the priests to be touched and blessed! Now, are the children to be advised to be suspicious and keep a distance from priests? If so, the opportunities will be lost for communicating something important to the children at their early days of life: God’s love for them and the importance they have before God communicated visibly through the person of a priest.

The mission of the Church is affected in various other ways too. When negative impressions are created about the Church, the people tend to take the Church as of no significance in their life and give little importance for her teachings. It becomes difficult even for the bishops to correct or instruct as noted above. If Catholic Church loses its credibility as moral authority who is there to replace it? Luckily despite all the accusations against the Church, the world still looks towards Popes for moral guidance.

Financial Liabilities

Church is also victimised in the fact that in some countries Church had to bear the burden of the compensation for the victims of clerical sexual abuses. Many

dioceses and Religious Congregations had to pay a large amount in compensation to the victims of child abuse that they faced bankruptcy or had to sell off their properties to find money. Some lawyers found it lucrative to search for the cases involving priests as it gave them easy profit.

The question should be asked whether it is the Church to compensate the victims for the abuses or the society itself is to be called to bear the responsibility. It is the culture that promotes excessive freedom in sexual expressions that becomes the fertile soil for abuses. Though child sexual abuses are noted all over the world, one cannot deny the fact that it is in the Western culture which failed to put any restraint on sexual freedom that child sexual abuses flourished. As far as it is a sickness, cases are bound to appear in every culture and place but as a significant social problem it will appear where too liberal attitudes are maintained in sexual behaviours. Hence society rather than the Church has to find means to compensate the victims. The Church is only inheriting a problem from the society. Often the abusive priests themselves were abused in their childhood, much before they entered into seminary. The failure of the Church is only that it could not screen out the prospective abusers. In fact, there is no perfect mechanism to detect dangerous candidates and ward them off from ordination. It is an injustice done to the Church by the State to expect her to compensate financially for the mistakes of the abusive clergy. If the priest in question and his family are unable to manage the burden, society has to evolve a way to help out the victims for reasonable rehabilitation in which Church will collaborate as part of her mission.

Other Secondary Victims

There are many other victims too. The family of the children who experienced clerical abuse are at loss to come to terms with its impact on the family. Their relationship with priests, parish and people are affected. The shame and anger experienced by the family members are expressed in many ways. Some isolate themselves by moving away to other places where they are less known and less likely to become focus of attention. Some others decide to have nothing to do with faith and the Church. When a priest is found abusive, the parish community is in turmoil. Often the community gets divided, some standing with the accused and others fighting against him. Of course, the community feel hurt, scandalized and faith itself is affected when its leader fails to walk the talk.

Sometimes the faithful rightly ask the question why they have to contribute to the Church when their money is used to bail out the priest or the diocese. The Church's charitable activities are affected when people fail to donate thinking

that what they give will not go for the right cause. Indirectly, the recipients of Church's charitable works, the poor and the marginalized become the victims of the child abuse. Think also of the future of the inmates of an orphanage or a boarding house forced to close down due to the abuses of some persons. The Canadian TV documentary *The Boys of St. Vincent* is around the theme of the abuses of the boys of the orphanage by Religious brothers. The impact finally is the closing down of a prestigious time-honoured institute. Thus with the negative and one-sided perceptions of the Church and its institutions many charitable undertakings will be affected. Who are the victims?

Things to Consider

1. Imperfections of a particular priest or bishop is not to be equated with the problem of the Church and her teachings. The problems of the individuals and their way of responses have more to do with their personality styles and the personal issues with which they entered the vocational life than something to do with the Church. If they are abusers, it is not because of the Church, but of their personal history, the culture and their personal perception of right and wrong of such behaviours. The fact that there is a tendency in the victims to become victimisers later, also indicates that the source of the problem of child sexual abuse is to be searched primarily in the childhood experiences of the victimisers.

In fact the perpetrators have abused also the trust placed on them by the Church. They have conveniently used the Church institutions for their selfish purposes. Instead of blaming and labelling the Church as a corrupt institution and desiring to see her downfall, discussion should be on what preventive factors should be in place in Church institutions that such manipulations are averted. It should lead us to search for ways and means for reform and renewal for the clergy to strengthen the internal preventive mechanisms. If those who enter the seminaries lack awareness about the seriousness of the harm done by the abuses and conviction about the immorality of such behaviours, formation should be strengthened to fill the lacuna.

2. An attitudinal change is required. We cannot view one to be totally at one side of the spectrum of being victim or victimiser. To take a strong one-sided stand for one opposing the other is to forget that everyone is involved — victim and victimizer — is struggling with managing life and growing to greater maturity. Compassionate understanding for both can make us collaborators in creating a more humane society and healing the wounds whether it be of victims of abuse or of victimisers. What is important when we deal with victimisers is not so

much to see them punished and revenged but how they could be healed and enabled to live a happy life and that they become less of a threat to the safety of children. In this process they can be collaborators than enemies. Instead of seeing Church and priests as part of the problem, if they were seen as possible partners to resolve the problem, the society could gain much from the resources of the Church to combat this malady. The Church has effective structures and people of goodwill and commitment which can be used for creating awareness and healing.

Globally, attention to child sexual abuse in religious contexts has focused on the Catholic Church. There has been a concerted effort from some sections of the media and people to project the Catholic Church as mean and outdated. It is clear, however, that child sexual abuse is not a problem specific to Catholic Church. It is present in all religions and in all societies. Unwittingly some sections of the Catholics too played into its critics or used the situation to express their own personal grudge or displeasure with Church's positions in other unrelated matters like celibacy for clerics, clericalism, ordination of women, etc. If the focus is on creating safe environment for children and dealing with the global problem of child sexual abuse, Catholic Church is a great platform to collaborate and even to set a model in its management.

Had the media and investigators looked for the good of the children and are passionate for creating a safer society, they should be keener to locate the available resources in the Catholic Church than bent on witch-hunting and seeing her dignity and fame brought down. The vast majority of the priests and religious living honest life and committed to the service of the people, should be sought for involving more earnestly in being part of the solution. If all people concerned are in partnership — the Church, legal system, the society at large — it will assure a better world than working at crossroads and often engaged in defending and protecting one from the other.

3. For collaboration, we need to necessarily engage in conversations. There should be platforms to engage everyone in telling the stories, analysing, planning and responding. In the last few decades Popes were continuously reminding the bishops and priests that they should hear the stories of the victims and doing so they themselves will change. Stories of the victims and victimisers too are to be listened to in order to have adequate responses. We should never fail to recognize that both victims and perpetrators are children of God and are in need of salvation. Jesus' way is to go in search of the one lost sheep leaving the ninety-nine which are in safety. If the abusers are to be brought back to mainstream as

reformed and socially useful people, they have to be helped to figure out their problem and explore the ways to make them genuinely loving, caring and non-abusive people. Often, they themselves are aware that what they do is a heinous crime but find no way to come out of their predicament. A priest abuser honestly acknowledges, “There was a hideous poison that had gotten into my system. It had poisoned my life and now I was out poisoning other people’s lives with no idea how horrifying it was. I feel like I want to escape from myself and jump into another person. I want to be somebody else because this truth in me is just devastating. It paralyzes me. I did this. I did it...great guy, great priest, lover of humanity. I did this. I just cannot believe it. I cannot believe that I put myself in a predicament where it was going to cost me so dearly all my life.”¹¹ Given the understanding and therapeutic assistance, most of the good-willing perpetrators can bounce back to normality and with proper supervision and surveillance they can reasonably be reinstated in ministry.

4. If the issue is seen as a problem of the immature or pathologically sick individuals who became priests and turned abusive, the society and media could collaborate with the efforts of the Church to ward off such people entering into priesthood or screening them out. The exposition of the ugly realities ailing the Church can be, while painful, also a great opportunity for purification and transformation of the Church. Today Church authorities at the top would not be slack in acting sternly on the abusive priests to the point of defrocking and bishops who fail to act decisively to stop such horrible things to the extent of forcing retirement.
5. People need to look at the clergy and the Church from a more realistic perspective. The clergy should not be viewed as belonging to another category of people distinct from general population. They are also the product of the same society as others and are affected by all that happen around them. If the culture has trivialized sex and no qualms about public display of sexual expressions, it becomes normalized. The persons who join to become priests and religious do not, then, by their entry into seminary can delete easily what is registered firmly in their unconscious. Some who are not open enough or are afraid, go through the formation mechanically with no impact or transformation in their personal life. Church cannot be blamed for it as the problem is transferred from family to the Church. In fact, what was not seen by the society and family as problem earlier is seen as a problem when they see it happening among the priests. So instead of thinking that a magical wand would transform those who enter into seminary to follow a radically different set of values, consider them as people who carry the norms, values that society promote and as carrying the

wounds and pains of their past experiences. The Church is also to be seen not as an otherworldly reality but human one with limited resources to identify and correct the deformations or problems that seminarians carry with them. But it is unfair to evaluate the community of the Apostles as immature and unholy seeing one Judas in the group! Judas remained the same even after three years of training by Jesus but the other disciples were transformed. This realistic view may help the lay people not to be scandalized by the stray incidents and not to base their faith in relation to the good or bad behaviours of the priests.

6. We need to create a world with proper values around sexuality. Sex seen as a potential for easy money by profit-makers with no scruples about morality and sufferings of the victims corrupts the mind-set of the people. Society itself becomes victim of such people who promote unbridled pleasure and it slowly erodes the sense of propriety and religious values. The people and ideologies with such vested interest will rejoice that the institutions like Catholic Church loses her grip over the people. It is the Church which took strong positions in the past to fight against the immorality and set right standards to follow. She cannot be doing it less when unbridled pleasure and self-gratification assert their rule and standard over the new generations. People of goodwill and moral sense should stand by the Church in her effort to make a safer environment for children and together find new ways to curb the degradation of sex to pleasure and profit and promote its sublime purposes of the Creator.

Conclusion

If we were to search for victims and victimisers there will be no clear demarcations. Anyone or group may find in the role of victims, victimisers and healers at the same time. The need of the hour is not to hunt for priest-abusers but to recognize the clerical sexual abuse as part of a social problem and to be searching for solutions collaboratively. The Catholic Church with its commitment to morality and vast infra-structure can play a major role to propose and promote ways and means to bring down the malaise substantially, not only among clerics but in the society at large. The Church has to regain the trust of the society in her earnestness to address the issue and society should recognize what the Church has done already to put order in its stall. States can learn from the Church the effective ways of dealing with the problem of child sexual abuse.

Endnotes

- ¹ “Brazilian Catholic Archbishop Bans Priests from Being Alone with Children” [access: 10.07.2021], <https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/brazilian-catholic-archbishop-bans-priests-from-being-alone-with-children/9434#https://international.la-croix.com/news/brazilian-catholic-archbishop-bans-priests-from-being-alone-with-children/9434#>
- ² HANS ZOLLNER – *et al.*, *Safeguarding, Reflecting on Child Abuse, Theology and Care*, Peeters, 2018, 225.
- ³ STEPHEN ROSSETTI, *Why Priests are Happy*, Ave Maria Press, Indiana 2011, xiii.
- ⁴ STEPHEN ROSSETTI, *Why Priests are Happy*, Ave Maria Press, Indiana 2011, 10.
- ⁵ C.J. SCICLUNA – H. ZOLLNER – D. H. AYOTTE, *Toward Healing and Renewal*, Paulist Press, New Jersey 2012, 35.
- ⁶ Up to 40% of victims of sexual abuse exhibit no long-term negative consequences of their experience (Finkelhor and Berliner, 1995).
- ⁷ In the 52 year period 4,392 priests abused or were alleged to have abused Minors in USA. That is about 4% of all clergy who served in those years. (Monica Applewhite, PhD, The Clerical Sexual Abuser. Conference, Understanding and responding to the sexual abuse of minors in the Roman Catholic Church”, Akademia Ignatianum, Krakow, Poland.)
- ⁸ *The Jesuit Review of Faith and Culture*, Nov 26, 2018
- ⁹ *Ecclesia in Oceania*, No. 49
- ¹⁰ BOSTON GLOBE STAFF, Betrayal – *The Crisis in the Catholic Church*, Little Brown and Company, Boston 2002, 3.
- ¹¹ STEPHEN J. ROSSETTI, *Slayer of the Soul*, Connecticut, 1990.

OM, SHALOM, AND CHRIST TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF INTERCULTURALITY?

Tomy Mundankunnel, CMF

Part I

I am an Indian religious living in an intercultural community¹ in Manila for four years. Since it is an international academic community, every year there are members passing out and new members coming in. Therefore, the community remains always 'new' with an average of hundred members every year. These hundred members who form one community hail from over ten countries with diverse cultures. It is really beautiful and wonderful that these people of diverse cultures make one community and live in peace!

At first glance the common religion and its faith-living appear to be the unifying factor of the community. But a closer look reveals that it is not only the religious elements, but also there are very many common cultural elements in all of us that correlate and keep us related and united. Consciously or unconsciously these common cultural elements constantly interact and intersect and form a common platform for all of us to coexist in peace and wellbeing and thus to reach the ultimate fulfilment in the cosmic communion. In fact, in an intercultural community like this, (the whole world is now an 'intercultural community'), the real learning — learning from life and learning for life — takes place more through the genuine interpersonal interaction of people belonging to diverse cultures, than from within the four walls of a smart classroom. In this paper we will be exploring how *om* as a pragmatic cultural element common to almost all of us in its form, meaning, and praxis correlates beyond the velocity of sound and the intensity of emotions, at a level of original unity and the ultimate fulfilment.

The Starting Point

The daily common Eucharistic celebration presided over by priests from the different countries usually reflect the cultural unity in diversity. Interestingly, one of

Fr. Tomy Mundankunnel is an Indian Claretian Missionary and he is currently doing his research in the university of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines.

the priests on his turn of presiding, at the exchange of peace usually ‘shouts’ shalom, peace, shalom. Perhaps, the ‘shouts’ of shalom is the expression of the unstoppable inner cry, the unending quest for peace, amidst crisis and chaos. However dissonant his verbal exchange of shalom is with the actual meaning it signifies, the *om* of shalom usually echoes the Indian *om* within me and eventually correlate with the *om* in other cultures around me. And that sets this journey through *om* in other diverse cultures go towards a theology of interculturality.

Before We Start

Om in Hinduism is very much mystical and theologically very profound. It stands for God Himself. It is highly cultic and deeply religious. Almost all the important *mantras* (prayers/chants) begin with *om* and end with *om* followed by *shanti, shanti, shanti* (peace). All the rituals and sacrifices are accompanied by the chanting of *om* followed by various *mantras* right from the beginning to the end. The traceable cultural dimensions of it, for example, *om* as the source of all music (*Hindusthani* and *Karnatic*), is also highly mystified. Almost all the classical *Ragaas* and *Githaas* are dedicated to different gods as mystical hymns. However, as classical music, now, these have become very much part of the common culture. There are several Hindu scriptures elaborately describing it. Obviously, it is far beyond the scope of this paper to explore all those different dimensions of *om* in details. Therefore, with a general understanding of *om* in Hinduism, we focus more on *om* as experienced in praxis as a unifying common element in the diverse cultures we represent.² We limit our study to the cultural dimension of *om* as a unifying common element in several cultures around the world and propose a theology of interculturality for ultimate peace and wellbeing.

Om in Hinduism

Origin and Development

Literal Roots: In Sanskrit ‘*O*’ is constitutently a diphthong, contracted from ‘*a*’ and ‘*u*’ which when pronounced quickly have the sound of ‘*o*’, and which combined with ‘*m*’ gives to the whole a resonant, humming sound.³ It is thus composed of three letters (*a, u, m*) in a single sound.

Cultic and Religious Evolution of Om in Hinduism

Om is the most sacred syllable, the first sound of the Almighty — the sound from which emerges each and every other sound, whether of music or of language.⁴ It is a sacred syllable which first appears in the Upanishads as a mystic monosyllable, regarded by some as the basis or ‘seed’ (*bija*) of all *mantras*. It is the root-syllable of

origination and dissolution. Thus, *om* is the one eternal syllable of which all that exists is but the development.⁵

Om is a compound of the three letters, *a*, *u*, *m*, which are typical of the three Vedas. In the Upanishads where it first appears, it is declared to have a mystic power and to be worthy of the deepest meditation.⁶ As the mystic syllable par excellence, it proved attractive because the repetition of it had the effect of inducing concentration. Thus, it was made the subject of meditation while it was also regarded as the most natural expression for God.⁷

It is regarded as an eternal sound which symbolizes the timeless transcendent. In its three components, it represents as the time-bound triple sequence of the beginning, duration, and dissolution of the universe,⁸ and therefore in later times the monosyllable represents the Hindu triad or union of the three gods; *a*) Vishnu, *u*) Siva, and *m*) Brahma. This monosyllable is called *Udgitha*.⁹ The unified sound of the mantra then points to the basic transcendental unity of the *Trimurti*.¹⁰ However, we have another view that there is not the slightest allusion to the form in which, for the last ten centuries, at least, seems to have been almost exclusively worshipped in India, that of the *Linga* or “phallus.” Neither is there the slightest hint of another important feature of later Hinduism, the *Trimurti*, or triune combination of *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, and *Siva*, as typified by the mystical syllable *om*; although, according to high authority on the religions of antiquity, the *Trimurti* was the first element in the faith of the Hindus, and the second was the *Linga*.¹¹

The Use and Functions of Om

Om is used at the commencement of prayers and religious ceremonies, and is generally placed at the beginning of books. It is a word of solemn invocation, benediction, and consent, so sacred that when it is uttered no one must hear it.¹²

The first function of *om* is to condense and simplify without jettisoning anything of value. The second function is to be a response to man’s need for affirmation and acceptance, for saying yes. *Om* is yes, fulfilment, or, as the *Chandogya* Upanishad puts it, “truly this syllable is assent — and this is indeed fulfilment.” It is not that the mere pronunciation of *om* fulfils all desires and forgives all sins, but that he who has fulfilled and is fulfilling his desires is led to exclaim and to chant the imperishable *om*.¹³

Om in the Vedas

The syllable *om* is not found in the *Rg Veda* or the *Atharva Veda*. We find its first veiled appearance in the *Taittiriya Samhita* of the *Black Yajurveda*, and it is

frequently used in the *Brahmanas* where it is generally the response of the priest, who presents the offerings, to verses of the *Rg Veda* pronounced by the officiating priest. It appears that initially this sound expressed acquiescence in the action that was taking place or in the formulas that were being uttered: “So be it!” In the *Aitareya Brahmana*, however, a deeper significance is attached to *om*. It signifies the “essence” both of the Vedas and of the whole cosmos.¹⁴

Om in the Puranas

The Puranas attribute the letters *om* (*a, u, m*) to the three gods: *a* for Vishnu, *u* for Siva, and *m* for Brahma.

*Akaro Visnuruddista; Ukarastu Mahesvarah
Makarastu smrto Brahma; Pranavastu traytmakah¹⁵ (Vayu Purana).*

According to the *Puranas*, the sound *om* is called *Pranava* or *Brahman*. All mantras begin with the sound *om*. Because of its sacredness, *Sudras* and other low-caste people are not allowed to utter it or hear it.

Om in the Upanishads

The Upanishads, pursuing the meaning further, not only saw an expression of *Brahman* in this syllable but also identified *om* with *Brahman*, that is, with Brahma as manifested by the sound of *om*.

1) Katha Upanishad

Katha Upanishad presents *om*, through the conversation between *Nachiketas* and *Yama*. *Om* is the ultimate goal of man; for this syllable is *Brahman*, the most high: this syllable if one knows, whatsoever one shall desire, it is his.¹⁶

2) Taittiriya Upanishad

The very first chapter of *Taittiriya Upanishad* opens with a divine greeting of *Hari om*. And it closes with a kind of final blessing, *Om! Peace! Peace! Peace!* The second chapter further expounds the syllable *om*.¹⁷ Chapter eight once again deals extensively on *om*.¹⁸

3) Aitereya Upanishad

Aitereya Upanishad opens with the greeting *Hari om*, and we do not find any further details of *om* in it.

4) Prashna Upanishad

Om! Salutation to the Supreme Spirit. The Supreme is *om*; thus begins the

Prashna Upanishad of six questions. The fifth question of *Shaihya Satyakama* is all about *om* and the *Rishi Pippalada* answers him satisfactorily.¹⁹

5) *Mandukya Upanishad*

In fact, the whole of *Mandukya* Upanishad deals with *om*. It explains the cosmic dimension of *om* through its different verses.²⁰ All this universe is pictured as the eternal *Brahman*: The Self which is fourfold; 1) *Vaishwanara*, the universal male, who has nineteen doors, whose place is wakefulness, He is the first. 2) *Taijasa*, the inhabitant in luminous mind, who has nineteen doors, whose place is dream, He is the second. 3) *Prajna*, the lord of wisdom, who has conscious mind as the door, whose place is the perfect slumber, He is the third. This is the Almighty, this is the Omniscient, this is the Inner Soul, this is the Womb of the Universe, this is the Birth and Destruction of creatures. Now this, the Self, as to the imperishable Word is *om*: and as to the letters, His parts are the letters and the letters are His parts, namely, *AUM (om)*. The Waker, *Vaishwanara*, the Universal Male is *A*, the first letter; the dreamer, *Taijasa*, the Inhabitant in Luminous Mind is the second letter *U*; and the sleeper, *Prana*, the Lord of Wisdom is the third letter *M*. Letterless is the fourth, the Incommunicable, the end of phenomena, the Good, the One on Whom there is no other: thus is *OM*.²¹

6) *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*

Om is the opening syllable of this Upanishad.²² It is used as something very sacred and important. We do not find any other reference or explanations of *om* in this Upanishad.

7) *Chhandogya Upanishad*

Two of the three chapters of *Chhandogya* Upanishad deal extensively with *om*. *Om* is personified here in the first verse of the first chapter itself as an object of worship. The Upanishad explains well how the syllable *om* satisfies all the desires of man and takes him to the imperishable delightfulness.²³

8) *Kaivalya Upanishad and Nilarudra Upanishad*

These two Upanishads open with the welcome wish of *om, shanti, om!* Beginning in peace, moving in peace, and reaching the ultimate fulfilment-peace!

9) *Isha, Kena, Mundaka and Katha Upanishads*

These Upanishads do not seem to have many direct references to *om*. *Isha* Upanishad in its seventeenth verse uses *om* as a salutation.²⁴ Taken together, the Upanishads have a detailed analysis and explanation of *om*. It is from these

explanations the later scholars have further explored its meaning and significance.

Om in the Tantric Language

Om is called a *bija* in *Tantric* language and it is called *Tara* in the *Tantric* works.²⁵ This is the seed-sounds of the *Tantriks* — which carry in them the principles of things. It has its forms which stand behind the revelatory and inspired speech that comes to man's supreme faculties, and these compel the forms of things in the universe; it has its rhythms — for it is no disordered vibration, but moves out into great cosmic measures — and according to the rhythm is the law, arrangement, harmony, and the processes of the world it builds. Life itself is a rhythm of God.²⁶

Om in Vaishnavism

Though generally the origin of language is attributed to *Prajapati*, whose meditation on the three worlds arose the threefold knowledge (the three Vedas); from whose meditation on them emerged the syllables, *bhur*, *bhuvah* and *svah* (representing earth, atmosphere and sky); and from whose meditation on these originated the syllable *om*, which co-ordinates all speech and represents the totality of the world. *Vaishnavism* define *om* according to its respective theological notions. Thus, *Vaishnavas* identify the sound-form of *om* with Visnu.²⁷

Om in Saivism

For the *Saivites*, Siva in his form of *Nadatanu*, that is, 'consisting of sound', is the syllable *om*.²⁸ Siva's drum produced this sound and through it came the notes of the "octave", *sa*, *ri*, *ga*, *ma*, *pa*, *dha*, and *ni*. Thus, by the sound produced from his drum (*damaru*) Siva successively recreates the world.²⁹

Om According to Swami Vivekananda

For Swami Vivekananda *om* is a mantra; it is word and wisdom. In the universe, *Brahma* or *Hiranyagabha* or the cosmic *Mahat* first manifested himself as name, and then as form, that is, as this universe. All these expressed sensible universe is the form, behind which stands the eternal inexpressible *Sphota*, the manifester as *Logos* or Word. This eternal *Sphota*, the essential eternal material of all ideals or names, is the power through which the Lord creates the universe; nay, the Lord first becomes conditioned as the *Sphota*, and then evolves Himself out as the yet more concrete sensible universe. This *Sphota* has one word as its only possible symbol, and this is *om*. This *om* and the eternal *Sphota* are inseparable; and, therefore, it is out of this holiest of all holy words, the mother of all names and forms, the eternal *om* that the whole universe may be supposed to have been created. It is called the *Nada-Brahma*, the Sound-*Brahman*.³⁰

Om According to Sri Aurobindo

Om, the sacred syllable of the Veda is not only the pure state of the universal existence but also the existence in all its parts, the waking world and the dream self and the sleeping, the manifest, half-manifest and hidden, *Bhurloka*, *Bhuvar* and *Swar*, — the right means to win all of them, enjoy all of them and transcend all of them. *Om* is the symbol and the symbolized. It is the symbol in which all sound of speech is brought back to its wide; pure indeterminate state. It is the symbolized, the changeless, undiminishing, unincreasing, unappearing, and undying reality which shows itself to experience in all this change, increase, diminution, appearance, and departure, in a particular sum and harmony of them we call the world. Just as *om*, the pure eternal sound-basis of speech shows itself to the ear in the variations and combinations of impure sound which in a particular sum and harmony of them we call the Veda.³¹

Om is a word in instance. The word, *aksharam*, meaning both syllable and unshifting, when coupled with *om*, is a word in instance; *om* the syllable also meant, the inevitable, *Brahman*, who changes not nor perishes.³²

Om in Buddhism

Om is a sacred mantra used in Tibetan Buddhism. The invocation *Om Mani Padme Hum* is widely used throughout Tibet. It is translated, ‘Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus’. And there are manifold symbolic meanings attached to it.³³

Om in Sikhism

Om (*om*) is the title of one of Guru Nanak’s lengthiest compositions which is found between pages 929 and 938 of the *Adi Granth*. It is also the word which stands for God as primal Being. In the hymn *Omkar* is described as the creator of *Brahma* and the Vedas, the most sacred of Hindu Scriptures, as well as the one who made the universe.³⁴

The Psycho-Therapeutic and Religio-Spiritual Efficacy of Om

The Upanishads state that everything, existent and non-existent, can be grasped by uttering the sacred syllable *om*. This psycho-therapeutic efficacy of *om* is considered limitless and its utterance redeems all errors in the performance of a sacrifice. Nearly all the prayers and recitals of sacred passages are prefixed by the utterance of *om*. Meditation on *om* satisfies every need and ultimately leads to liberation. When one pronounces or chants *om* correctly, all the basic sounds also echo. It is believed to be the traditional way of clearing all the impediments in the vocal cord to make one chant the hymns correctly.³⁵

The sound of *om* is said to have emotional effects too subtle to be defined, so that its utterance is regarded as a very personal act. Thus wherever it is uttered, in temple or home, it must be sotto voce lest it should be heard by anyone of low caste.³⁶

The Music in *Om/aum*

Musically, it is also held that the term *om* or *aum* is made up by three base notes *a*, *u*, *m* or the basic *sa*, *pa* of the fundamental scale and again *sa* (the base note) of the immediately higher scale. When one pronounces these notes in continuity, all the basic notes from *sa* to *ni* also sound.³⁷

Om* and *Omkara

N. N. Bhattacharya would give a similar meaning to *Omkara* as well with that of *om*. It means a prosperous and auspicious beginning. In feminine form *Omkara* denotes a Buddhist *Sakti* or the female personification of divine energy.³⁸

John Dowson too gives an equal footing for *Omkara* with that of *om*. He further identifies *Omkara* with the name of one of the twelve great *lingas*, said to have been at Ujjain.³⁹

So far, we were journeying through *om* in Hinduism and its denominations within India. We could see how religious and cultic; how theological and mystical is *om* in Hinduism within India, especially in north India. In south India *om* is more cultural with the common meaning as in many other cultures we are journeying through.

***Om* in Dravidian Languages of South India**

In the Dravidian language of Tamil, *om* takes the form of *ama*, meaning yes, so it be, okay. It is one of consensus and agreement, ultimately leading to peace. In Malayalam language of Kerala *om* becomes *aam*, a shorter form of Amen in Hebrew,⁴⁰ with the same meaning of let it be so, so be it, and yes; with the same implication of agreement and peace. What is purely religious and cultic in Hinduism in general, and throughout north India, in particular, becomes more cultural with a common meaning in south India and elsewhere.

The Christian use of *Om* in India

The Christians in India use *om* as part of *bhajans* (*bhajans* are brief devotional hymns rhythmically repeated at varying tempo, invoking, adoring, praising, and glorifying God).⁴¹ *Om* is therefore, mostly a cultural element for the Christians as a musical component of the *bhajans*. The rhythmic chanting of the brief hymns helps the shutdown of the senses and the concentration of the mind leading to peace and

serenity deep within. Therefore, though it appears as a musical component prefixed to the chant, it has a spiritual-therapeutic dimension as well.

Om in Burmese Language (Myanmar)⁴²

In Burmese languages in general *om* means comfort, wellbeing, and peace. It is very much cultural and experiential in daily life. For example, when a child falls, the parents or the teachers, or any elders immediately pronounces *om* to comfort the child, to free the fallen child from all harm, to make him/her restful, relaxed, and at peace! *Om* assures the wellbeing of the fallen child and guarantees ‘hope’.

Om in WA language (Myanmar)

WA language is spoken by the *WA* tribe in the North-Eastern part of Myanmar. In *WA* language *om* means water. Water is the source of life. It cleanses and purifies. Ultimately, therefore, water signifies comfort, fulfilment, purity, wholeness, wellbeing, and peace.⁴³

Om in Chin Language (Myanmar)

Om is used as the family title by some of the clans of the *Chin* tribe of Myanmar. Some take it as proper noun. As a title and as a name *om* means stillness and peace. In general, *om* stands for wellbeing, prosperity, and peace. People exchange *om* enquiring the wellbeing of each other; wishing welfare and prosperity; and assuring peace and fulfilment.

Om in Indonesia

Om is deeply cultural for the *Sumba* tribe of Indonesia. It is personified in *Bahasa* language. In *Bahasa* language stands for uncle (*paman*-maternal uncle). *Om* (*paman*/uncle) has a very significant position and a key role in every family. He is the “peacemaker” in case of a dispute or quarrel; *om* (*paman*/uncle) is the “protector” and “safe-guarder” of the children, in case the parents are incapacitated or deceased; *om* (*paman*/uncle) imparts blessings to the nieces and nephews; *om* (*paman*/uncle) takes care of the marriages of the nieces. Ultimately, in all these, *om* (*paman*/uncle) becomes a living symbol of hope, wellbeing, and peace! *Om* symbolised in *paman*/uncle is therefore, essentially cultural and is very much part of daily life.

In *Batakness* *om* takes the form of *oma* meaning mother. *Oma*/mother is a source of comfort, prosperity, wellbeing, and peace! *Oma* is a peacemaker everywhere.

Om in Vietnamese

In Vietnamese language *om* has different nuances. When parents utter *om* to the children, when elders or teachers utter *om* to the students or youngsters, and

when family members greet each other with *om*, it means comfort, wellbeing, and peace. But when *om* is uttered by heterosexual adults, it takes a romantic/erotic connotation.⁴⁴ Ultimately, in such situations too, *om* stands for comfort, wellbeing, and fulfilment in a strict positive sense. In Vietnamese too *om* is essentially cultural and it stands for wellbeing, comfort, and peace.

***Om* in Sri Lanka**

In Sri Lanka *om* generally stands for consensus and agreement. It means, yes, let it be so, or so be it. It is similar to *aam* in Malayalam and *ama* in Tamil. Agreements ultimately lead to peace, comfortability, and wellbeing. It is very much cultural and is part of daily life.

***Om* in Greek**

The Greek alphabets begin with Alpha (A) and ends with Omega (O). As alpha and omega—the beginning and the end, they embrace all sounds, all words, and all meanings.⁴⁵ Together they sound *om*. As such it embodies everything, and therefore, is complete, whole, and thus, peace!

***Om* in Shalom (Hebrew)**

In Hebrew words are formed from roots, generally from three consonants. When the root consonants are supplied with necessary vowels according to the contexts, a variety of words, often with some relation in meaning, can be coined from a single root. Thus, *shalom* is formed of the root *sh-l-m* with the meaning peace/wellbeing. *Sh-l-m* also serves as the root for: *hishtalem* (it was worth it); *shulam* (was paid for); *meshulam* (paid for in advance); *mushlam* (perfect); and *shalem* (whole). Though at the surface level there is not much of an explicit connection, at the deeper level, it is leading to ultimate wellbeing, comfort, and peace!

In Judaism *shalom* is one of the underlying principles of Torah. Biblically, *shalom* is seen in reference to the wellbeing of others (Gen 43, 27; Ex 4, 18); to treaties (1Kg 5, 12); and in prayer for the welfare of cities or nations (Ps 122, 6; Jer 29, 7). “Her ways are pleasant ways and all her paths are *shalom*/peace (Prov 3, 17). The Talmud presents it as: “the entire Torah is for the sake of the ways of *shalom* (Gittin 59 b). Talmud continues to state that the name of God is “Peace”, therefore, one is not permitted to greet another with *shalom* in places such as bathroom. Maimonides comments in the Mishnah Torah: “Great is peace; as the whole Torah was given in order to promote *shalom* in the world (The Laws of Chankah 4:14).

The author Cornelius Plantinga in his book, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, construes *shalom* at a deeper level. For him, the webbing together

of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfilment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *shalom*. We call it peace. But it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, *shalom* means universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight — a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its creator and saviour opens door and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. *Shalom* is the peaceful way things ought to be.

Shalom and its Derivatives in other Semitic languages

The meaning of completeness/whole, central to the term *shalom*, can be confirmed in related terms found in other Semitic languages also. The Assyrian term *salamu* means to be complete, unharmed, and paid/atoned. Another Assyrian word, *sulumu*, means welfare. The idea of *shalom* as a concept and action is seen in the Arabic root *salaam* meaning to be safe, secure, and forgiven. Ultimately peace is the underlying factor in all these.

Shalom in Tagalog (Philippines)

In Tagalog *salamat* originally meant wellbeing and peace. At root, it is very close to the Assyrian *salamu*; the Arabic *salaam*, and the Hebrew *shalem*. There could be an etymological connection with the Sanskrit *shom* as well. Centuries of other cultural influences, have added the new meaning of thankfulness/indebtedness to its original meaning of peace. Whatever the changes that have taken place under any influence, the original meaning is still communicated and the word remains the same at root.

The Meeting Point – towards a Theology of Interculturality of Peace

Our journey through *om* to *shalom* in different cultures does intersect on cultural basis and form a solid ground for interculturality. The meeting point is one of “wellbeing” and “peace.” However diverse in whichever way we may be, whether we are religious, irreligious, or even atheists, ultimately all of us long for peace and wellbeing. Peace is our ultimate end in life, and ultimate peace is in the ultimate Reality of God. Journeying towards God, the ultimate source of the ultimate Peace and wellbeing, is no longer possible ‘alone’ as an individual, isolated, or separated culture or nation. The world has become a single global village and together we journey. Irrespective of all our ostensible diversities, we form a single web of relationships. We interact and amalgamate more than ever. *Om* and *shalom* with the vertical, horizontal, and depth dimensions, is a common pathway for the human nature and the cultures to make the journey “inward-out” towards the Supernatural-God.

Inculturation and interculturality are not something new or modern. They have always been there from the time the nature started creating the cultures. In fact, the Bible is deeply rooted on inculturation and interculturality. Therefore, as Christians, today when we present ourselves as agents of inculturation and interculturality, we ought to know the Biblical foundations of inculturation and interculturality, which will be continued in the next issue.

End Notes

¹ The Intercultural Community where I have been for last four years is ICLA (Institute for Consecrated Life in Asia), by the Claretian Missionary Congregation. In an intercultural uni-religious community like ICLA, the real learning takes place more through the open and mature interactions and discussions among the members, than through the conventional means. A word of thanks and appreciation to the director of ICLA, Fr. Prisco A. Cajés, OFM; Frs. Edgar G. Javier, SVD; Maxi Fernando, CSSR, and all my friends in ICLA who journeyed with me in this search, mutually enriching with their open and contributive responses.

² *Om* is presented here as a common cultural element as expressed and experienced by the members of this intercultural community of over hundred members from over ten different countries. Our focus here in this paper is only on the cultural evolution of *Om* signifying “peace” and “wellbeing” in the diverse cultures around the world. However, it has still a wide range of meanings and could be interpreted very differently, particularly in the cultic and ritualistic contexts of Hinduism. But, since our scope is limited and focused, we do not treat them here.

³ MARGARET – J. STUTLEY, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*, Delhi 1977, 213.

⁴ S. KUSH, ed., *Dictionary of Hinduism*, Delhi 2000, 221.

⁵ MARGARET – J. STUTLEY, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*, 213.

⁶ J. DOWSON, *Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History and Literature*, London 1961, 224.

⁷ N. N. BHATTACHARYYA, *A Glossary of Indian Religious Terms and Concepts*, Manohar Publ., 1990, 113.

⁸ K. WERNER, *A Popular Dictionary of Hinduism*, London 1994, 116.

⁹ J. DOWSON, *Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History and Literature*, 225.

¹⁰ K. WERNER, *A Popular Dictionary of Hinduism*, 116.

¹¹ H. H. WILSON, *Rig – Veda Sanhita*, New Delhi 1977, XXVII.

¹² J. DOWSON, *Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History and Literature*, 225.

¹³ R. PANIKKAR, *The Vedic Experience: Mantramanjuri*, London 1977, 768.

¹⁴ R. PANIKKAR, *The Vedic Experience: Mantramanjuri*, 768

¹⁵ M. VETTAM, *Puranic Encyclopaedia*, Delhi 1975, 544.

¹⁶ SRI AUROBINDO, *Upanishads. Texts, Translations and Commentaries*, Pondicherry 1972, 247.

Nachiketas speaks: “Tell me of That which thou seest elsewhere than in virtue and elsewhere than in unrighteousness, elsewhere than in this created and this uncreated, elsewhere than in that which has been and that which shall be.”

Yama speaks: “The seat or goal that all the Vedas glorify and which austerities declare, for the desire of which men practice holy living, of That will I tell thee in brief compass. *Om* is that goal, O *Nachiketas*. ... For this Syllable is Brahman, ... This support is the best, this support is the highest, knowing this support one grows great in the world of the Brahman.”

¹⁷ SRI AUROBINDO, *Upanishads. Texts, Translations and Commentaries*, 317.

¹⁸ SRI AUROBINDO, *Upanishads. Texts, Translations and Commentaries*, 323. *Om* is the Eternal; *om* is all this universe. *Om* is the syllable of assent: saying, ‘*Om!* Let us hear,’ they begin the citation. With *om* they sing the hymns of the *Sama*; with *om* SHOM they pronounce the Shastra. With *om* the priest officiating at the sacrifice says the response. With *om* *Brahma* begins creation. With *om* one sanctions the burnt offering. With *om* the Brahmin ere he expounds the knowledge, cries “May I attain the Eternal.” The Eternal verily he attains.

¹⁹ SRI AUROBINDO, *Upanishads. Texts, Translations and Commentaries*, 311-312. *Shaibya Satyakama*: “Lord, hen among men that meditate unto death on *om* the syllable, which of the worlds does he conquer by its puissance?” Rishi Pippalada: “This imperishable Word that is *om*, O *Satyakama*, is the Higher Brahman and also the Lower. Therefore, the wise man by making his home in the Word, wins to one of these.

If he meditates on the one letter of *om* the syllable, by that enlightened he attains swiftly in the material universe, and the hymns of the Rig-Veda escort him to the world of men: there endowed with askesis and faith and holiness he experiences majesty.

Now if by the two letters of the syllable he in the mind attains, to the skies he is exalted and the hymns of the *Yajur* escort him to the Lunar World. In the heavens of the Moon, he feels his soul’s majesty: then once more he returns.

But he who by all the three letters meditates by this syllable, even by *om* on the Most High Being, he in the Solar World of light and energy is secured in his attaining: as a snake casts off its slough: so he casts off sin, and the hymns of the *Sama-Veda* escort him to the heaven of the Spirit. He from that Lower who is the density of existence beholds the Higher than the Highest of whom every form is one city. To the earth the *Rig-Veda* leads, to the skies the *Yajur*, but the *Sama* to That of which the sages know. Thither the wise man by resting on *om* the syllable attains, even to that Supreme Quietude where age is not and fear is cast out by immortality.”

²⁰ SRI AUROBINDO, *Upanishads. Texts, Translations, and Commentaries*, 319. *Om* is this imperishable Word, *om* is the Universe, and this is the exposition of *om*. The past, the present and the future, all that was, all that is, all that will be, is *om*. Likewise, all else that may exist beyond the bounds of Time that too is *om*.

²¹ SRI AUROBINDO, *Upanishads. Texts Translations and Commentaries*, 319-321.

²² SRI AUROBINDO, *Upanishads. Texts Translations and Commentaries*, 327.

²³ SRI AUROBINDO, *Upanishads. Texts Translations and Commentaries*, 349-353. *Om* is *Udgitha*, the chant of *Sama-Veda*; for with *om* they begin the chant of *Sama-Veda*. 2. Earth is the substantial essence of all creatures and the waters are the essence of earth; herbs of the field are the essence of the waters; man is the essence of the herbs. Speech is the essence of man, Rig-Veda the essence of

Speech, Sama the essence of Rik. Of Sama *om* is the essence. 5. Speech is *Rik*, Breath is *Sama*; the Imperishable is *om* of *Udgitha*. These are the divine lovers, Speech and Breath, *Rik* and *Sama*. As a pair of lovers are these and they cling together in *om* the eternal syllable; now when the beloved and her lover meet, verily they gratify the desires of the other. He becomes the gratifier of the desires of men who with this knowledge worships *om* the eternal syllable. Now this *om* is the syllable of Assent; for to whatsoever one assents, one says *om*; and assent is blessing of increase. Verily he becomes a blesser and increaser of the desires of men who with this knowledge worships *om* the eternal syllable. By *om* the triple knowledge proceeds; with *om* the priest recites the *Rik*, with *om* he pronounces the Yajur, with *om* he chants the Sama. And all this is for the heaping up of the Imperishable and by the greatness of It and the delightfulness. Ch. II. The Gods and the Demons strove together and both were children of the Almighty Father. Gods took up for weapon *om* of *Udgitha*, for they said, “With this we shall overcome these Titans.” Gods worshipped *om* as Breath in the nostrils; but the Demons smote it with the arrow of evil. Gods worshipped *om* as Speech; but the Demons smote it with the arrow of Evil. Gods worshipped *om* as the Eye; but the Demons smote it with the arrow of Evil. Then the Gods worshipped *om* as the Ear; but the Demons smote it with the arrow of Evil. Then the Gods worshipped *om* as Mind; but the Demons smote it with the arrow of Evil. Then the Gods worshipped *om* as this which is Breath in the mouth and the Demons rushing against it dashed themselves to pieces; as when an object strikes against firm and solid rock, it dashes to pieces upon the rock.

²⁴ SRI AUROBINDO, *Upanishads. Texts Translations and Commentaries*, 24.

²⁵ N. N. BHATTACHARYYA, *A Glossary of Indian Religious Terms and Concepts*, 113.

²⁶ SRI AUROBINDO, *Upanishads. Texts Translations and Commentaries*, 127.

²⁷ MARGARET – J. STUTLEY, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*, 213.

²⁸ MARGARET – J. STUTLEY, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*, 213.

²⁹ S. KUSH, ed., *Dictionary of Hinduism*, 223.

³⁰ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. Mayavati Memorial Edition, Vol. 3, Calcutta 1964, 57.

³¹ SRI AUROBINDO, *Upanishads. Texts Translations and Commentaries*, 357-358.

³² SRI AUROBINDO, *Upanishads. Texts Translations and Commentaries*, 359.

³³ H. CHRISTMAS, *A Popular Dictionary of Buddhism*, London 1984, 141.

³⁴ W. O. COLE – P. S. SAMBHI, *A Popular Dictionary of Sikhism*, 123. The inevitable fate of birth and rebirth, irrespective of wealth, class or intellect is stressed as usual in the Guru’s teachings. The answer to the question, how can I be released? is through God, the Guru’s mercy and grace and by meditating upon God in one’s heart. “Worldly affairs and wanderings come to an end when the Name’s bliss enters the human mind”.

³⁵ S. KUSH, ed., *Dictionary of Hinduism*, 224.

³⁶ MARGARET – J. STUTLEY, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*, 213.

³⁷ S. KUSH, ed., *Dictionary of Hinduism*, 224.

³⁸ N. N. BHATTACHARYYA, *A Glossary of Indian Religious Terms and Concepts*, 113.

³⁹ J. DOWSON, *Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History and Literature*, 225. But it is probably the shrine of *Mahadeva* at *Omkara Mandhatta*, on the *Narmada*.

⁴⁰ B. GRIFFITHS, *The Cosmic Revelation*, Illinois 1983, 8.

⁴¹ An example of a *bhajan*: *Om bhagavaan, om bhagavaan, om bhagavaan prabhu Pitha bhagavaan* (2x2) *Om bhagavaan, om bhagavaan, om bhagavaan prbhu Puthra bhagavaan* (2x2) *Om bhagavaan, om bhagavaan, om bhagavaan prabhu Atma bhagavaan* (2x2) x2 times each. *Pitha* is Father; *Puthra* is Son; *Atma* is the Holy Spirit; and *Bhagavaan* is God. Therefore, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

⁴² These are materials culled and gathered from our intercultural living together as one family in ICLA. These are *Om* and *shalom* as lived, experienced, and shared by people of different cultures of the respective countries.

⁴³ R. E. HUME, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, Delhi 1995, 256. Here *om* stands for water and it gives elaborate explanations of it.

⁴⁴ SRI AUROBINDO, *Upanishads. Texts, Translation and Commentaries*, 349-353.

⁴⁵ *Om* is a compound of A, U, and M – *AUM* pronounced *OM*. See above

BOOK REVIEW

JAMES KANNANTHANAM, CMF

Exercising Leadership: Servant Model and Appreciative Inquiry Approach

Consecrated Life Series – 6,

Claretian Publications, Bangalore 2021, Pages: 296

The book titled *Exercising Leadership: Servant Model and Appreciative Inquiry Approach* written by Dr. James Kannanthanam, CMF, calls for a paradigm shift in leadership approach in the Church. The author reminds that every person is called to be a leader in small or big way. Though some are born with certain leadership traits, the author contents that effective and successful leadership is mostly a matter of learning. He provides innovative and positive models of leadership which can radically change the leadership of priests, consecrated people and all those in leadership role, making it highly effective and empowering.

The book contains five chapters and deals in depth on the different aspects of leadership making it applicable for all. In the first chapter, the author explains different styles of leadership and examines how and when they are appropriate or inappropriate. The second chapter focuses on the Servant Leadership from secular and biblical perspectives. Robert K. Greenleaf popularized successfully the Servant Leadership concept in the corporate management which can add new dimensions to the biblical concept of servant leadership when applied to Church leadership.

The third chapter introduces something very new in leadership approach — Appreciative Inquiry (AI) paradigm — which has created a revolution in leadership in the corporate world. This is the specific contribution the author intends to give to the leadership in the Church. There is a paradigm shift in this approach where the leadership moves from the deficit model to focus on the strength of the people and situations. Author contents that if the church leaders were to focus on the past and present capacities of persons and institutions — achievements, assets, unexplored potentials, strengths, elevated thoughts, opportunities, etc., — as

done in the AI approach, a radical change will happen in the style of leadership in the Church bringing extraordinary collaboration and innovation. Through AI approach, leaders create opportunities for the growth of the people and is highly effective in amplifying the best in people and situations and in empowering them.

The fourth chapter explains the leadership qualities from a secular and Christian leadership perspective. It describes the qualities of the self, managerial skills, and explores the qualities of leadership found in biblical and Church leaders. It speaks of practical ways in exercising leadership in the Church and explains about the necessary qualities a leader should imbibe. Specifically Christian leadership qualities are highlighted, such as the passion for Christ, passion for the people and seeking to do God's will.

The fifth chapter is more on organizational design. It explains in a simple way about the system theory, leadership strategies, team development and management, decision making strategies and conflict management. Showing the interconnectedness of Micro, Macro, Mega, and Remote systems, the chapter provides practical ways of evaluating institutions and projects and visioning a better future. It brings out the expectations that leaders learn to locate the strengths of the members, institutions and join those strengths with the mission and vision of the Church to bear thirty, sixty and hundred fold fruits.

Indeed, this book is very relevant for all specially the consecrated persons. The author has written in a simple way summarizing vast materials in nutshell. I personally feel that the book is very rich in its contents and can inspire the readers to be effective leaders. It will help to practice the leadership skills in a humble way and to cultivate important and necessary qualities to exercise in the role of leadership in the Church. The content of the book has particularly focused on the exercise of religious leadership which is not for prestige, name, and fame but to be a leader in the style of Jesus our Master who practiced true servant leadership. The author deserves our appreciations and I admire his hard-work in bringing out a meaningful, and significant book for all. I salute the author for his immense contribution for leadership in the Church and proposing a new approach – Appreciative Inquiry (AI) — as a paradigm shift in the way leadership is to be seen and practiced in the Church.

Sr. Dipikaben Macwan, SU

SANYASA: JOURNAL OF CONSECRATED LIFE

A biannual published by Sanyasa Institute for Consecrated Life, Bangalore

Sanyasa: Journal of Consecrated Life is a biannual publication of scholarly reflections committed to the Re-visioning and Renewal of Consecrated Life.

It welcomes the contributors with openness to express their views freely and responsibly.

Views expressed by the contributors are their own and do not necessarily manifest the view of the Editor and the Editorial Board.

The editors are indeed grateful to all the Priests and Religious for your encouragement and support and above all looking forward to your patronage.

Manuscripts for publication and books for review should be addressed to: **Executive Editor**, and business communications (correspondence, subscription, change of address) to: **Circulation Manager**

SANYASA: JOURNAL OF CONSECRATED LIFE

Sanyasa

Carmelaram Post

Bangalore – 560 035, Karnataka, India

Tel: 080 – 28439259; 28439944

E-mail: sjbancmf@gmail.com / sanyasac@gmail.com

Web: www.sanyasa.com

Dear Subscribers:

Kindly note the change in the rate of subscription of the Sanyasa: Journal of Consecrated Life. Since the beginning of the publication of this Journal in January 2006, we have been keeping the same rate. Now due to the escalation of the costs involved, we have decided to increase the rate of subscription minimally. We hope that our subscribers will understand this change and support this only Journal on Consecrated Life, published in India.

The new rates of subscription are as follows:

INDIA	SRI LANKA	OTHER COUNTRIES
One year ₹ 120	One year ₹ 285	One year US\$ 30
Two years ₹ 220	Two years ₹ 520	Two years US\$ 50
Three years ₹ 320	Three years ₹ 755	Three years US\$ 70
Five years ₹ 500		

Yes! I wish to subscribe to

SANYASA: JOURNAL OF CONSECRATED LIFE

I am enclosing DD / Cheque no.....dated.....drawn on (specify bank).....favoring SANYASA for ₹(add ₹ 15/- for non Bangalore cheques).

Name: _____

Address: _____

Pin: _____

Tel: _____

Fax: _____

E-mail: _____

ICL: Institute of Consecrated Life – SANYASA **Bangalore**

INCORPORATED TO PONTIFICAL LATERAN UNIVERSITY, ROME
AND CHRIST {DEEMED TO BE UNIVERSITY}, BANGALORE

Biennial Programs:

1. LICENTIATE IN THEOLOGY OF CONSECRATED LIFE
(June 16, 2021 - March 2023: Offered by Pontifical Lateran University, Rome)
2. MASTERS IN THEOLOGY OF CONSECRATED LIFE
(June 16, 2021 - March 2023: Offered by Christ {Deemed to be University}
Bangalore)

Annual Programs:

1. ONE YEAR DIPLOMA IN THEOLOGY OF CONSECRATED LIFE
(June 16, 2021 - March 2022)
2. INTENSIVE PREPARATORY COURSE FOR FINAL PROFESSION
(January 4, 2022 – 24 march 2022)

Summer Programs:

1. THREE-WEEK BIBLE PROGRAM ON THE OLD TESTAMENT
(April 04-22, 2022)
2. TWO-WEEK PROGRAM ON FORMATIVE SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE
(April 11-22, 2022)
3. ONE-MONTH BIBLE PROGRAM ON THE NEW TESTAMENT
(May 2-27, 2022)
4. ONE-MONTH INTENSIVE COURSE ON CONSECRATED LIFE
(May 2-27, 2022)

Online Programs:

1. 100 HOURS ONLINE WEEK-END COURSE ON THEOLOGY OF
CONSECRATED LIFE (July – December 2021)
2. FORMATIVE ACCOMPANIMENT: THEORY AND PRACTICUM (Three-Month
Distance Learning Course with Two-Week Residential Workshop for Forming
Formators) (November 1, 2021 – February 25, 2022)
3. ONLINE COURSE ON SAFEGUARDING MINORS (In Collaboration with
Gregorian University, Rome. (November 1, 2021 – March 31, 2022)
4. CONSECRATED LIFE LECTURE SERIES (Once in a month)

For further details and for application forms:

Website: www.sanyasa.com

Address: The Secretary, Sanyasa Institute

Carmelaram P.O., Bangalore - 560 035, Tel: 080 - 29519259

Mobile: 00-91-996 416 1332 | 831 085 7049 (Director)

E-mail: sanyasac@gmail.com or sanyasa.in@gmail.com

S A N Y A S A

Journal of Consecrated Life

Sanyasa, Carmelaram Post, Bangalore - 560 035, Karnataka, India

Tel: 91-80-28439259; 28439944

Mobile: 00-91-996 416 1332 | 831 085 7049 (Director)

E-mail: sanyasac@gmail.com; sanyasa.in@gmail.com; Web: www.sanyasa.com