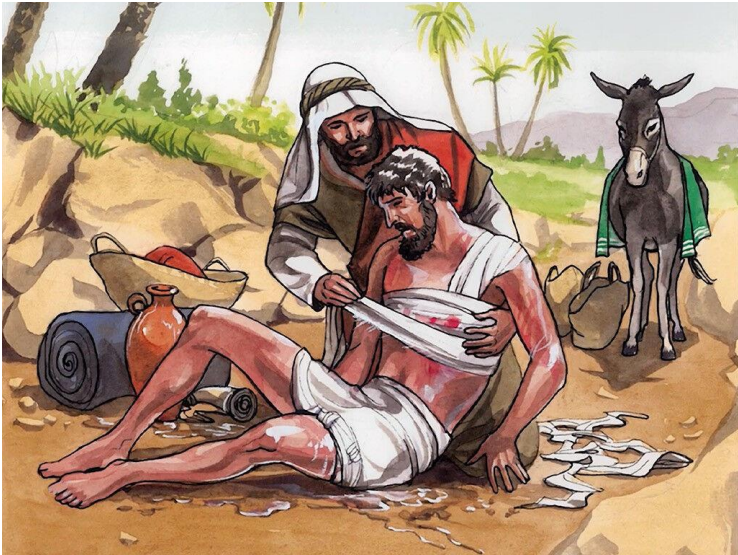


TO LOVE AND TO SERVE



Emmanuel Fernando, OMI

TO LOVE AND TO SERVE

Emmanuel Fernando, OMI

Email: emma1938omi@gmail.com

Rajabima Oblate Centre,

Jayanthi Mawatha,

Anuradhapura.

2021

DEDICATED
to
my brother-Oblates and the friends
who encouraged my apostolate of the pen.

CONTENTS

1. In search of a Christian Spirituality
2. Five Disciplines of Discipleship
3. Whatever good we do to the Needy, is done to Jesus
4. Becoming Missionary Disciples of Jesus in Today's Society
5. Why are we followers of Jesus?
6. Eucharist: Life of sharing and caring
7. Eucharistic living in Today's World
8. God's gift of Forgiveness
9. Forgiveness enhances life
10. Forgiveness, Healing and Peace
11. Examen of Consciousness
12. How to confess
13. Jesus' Mission of loving hastened His death on the Cross
14. Mary, the Missionary Mother of Jesus
15. Compassionate Persons respond to the cry of the poor
16. People-oriented Apostolate to bring fuller life to people
17. Sharing with the poor
18. In search of an Ecological Spirituality
19. Christian responsibility to bring forth life

1.

IN SEARCH OF A CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Introduction

Today more people are in search of spirituality, in search of religious experience. Even modern scientists are in search of spirituality. Searching for spirituality is one of the signs of the times. More people are looking for a center, which can hold everything together in all its apparent polarizations, contradictions and confusions. They are looking for ways to live in depth, to find this center in the ultimate Reality whom we call God in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions.

Some organized religions however seem to lack inspiration and meaning for many; they do not offer many people energy for life. They do not seem to resonate with people's genuine human experience. Some organized religions are promoting violence and terror; others are emphasizing external observances, traditions, rituals and rules. Political systems today are using organized religion to sustain their power.

What is spirituality?

Spirituality means basically to be filled with the Spirit of God; it is a Spirit-filled experience – God-experience- which embodies a vision, attitudes, values, virtues and aims for one's own life. It is also a way of life, a way of being and behaving. It is the power to live for God in everything. It is not a science nor a technology but a way one lives out of the Spirit of God. Christianity was called a way of life (Acts 9:2; 18:25; 19:9; 24:14, 22). Christian spirituality is rooted in the spirit of Jesus Christ, in his life and ministry which led to his death and Resurrection.

What is Experience?

Perhaps the etymology of the word provides the first clue to understanding the concept of experience. Ex-peri-ence is the knowledge a person acquires when s/he goes forth from oneself (ex) and studies, from every angle and perspective (peri), the world of things or realities (ence). Experience is knowledge which is not theoretical, conceptual or obtained from books, but acquired in working contact with reality; by mastering reality, so to speak and which one learns and comes to understand. The result of this encounter with the world – in those areas where the encounter takes place – is the acquisition of new data, and the elaboration of new images more in keeping with reality. Experience is incommunicable wealth, which confers authority on the person who acquired it; a verifiable knowledge which has made truth concrete and alive.

Conditions for Experience

Giving up prejudices and predetermined patterns are indispensable conditions for acquiring experience. To be closed is to deny all questioning and all opportunity to be enriched, revealing an authoritarian and doctrinaire attitude.

An experienced doctor is one who has encountered an illness on repeated occasions and in different forms and diverse circumstances, and who thus does not allow himself to be taken by surprise or to be mistaken. He knows not so much from what he has learned in books but from what he has learned from following the course of the illness and his analysis of the symptoms. His diagnosis of the disease is tested and verified; his knowledge is an experience.

Founders of all major Religions / Faiths had such experiences of the Spirit of God. Each one's experience of God-Spirit emphasizes one or other aspect of God-Spirit. In Jesus, the

Saviour, we see the compassion of God highlighted. In Prophet Mahammed, the call to brotherhood; in the Rishis of India, immanent presence of God in all things; these experiences are complementary and interrelated, being experiences of the same God-Spirit. According to Indian tradition, a spiritual person is one who is animated by the divine breath (Atman). When Atman is operative, s/he is spiritual.

The experience of Jesus

Jesus had an experience of God at his baptism (Mt 3:13-17; Lk3:21-22; Mk 1:9-11f). Baptism is a Greek word that primarily means 'to be overwhelmed', 'to be totally submerged in the truth of something', 'to be swept off one's feet by something or by someone. In this sense, Jesus was 'blown away' by John the Baptist's insight and courage. He could no longer resist the pressure of John's teaching and life. He would symbolize this being baptised by John.

For Jesus, baptism was a moment of conversion, of turning even more deliberately to his God. It was an historic and an extraordinary conversion. At Jesus' baptism, the 'heavens were opened' and God personally proclaimed that Jesus was His beloved Son. "*This is my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on him*" (Mt 3:13-17). In the Jewish society it was necessary that the biological paternity of children was accepted publicly. Jesus had no biological father. So God accepts the paternity of Jesus publicly. Otherwise the child would lack legitimacy and social standing among the people. The fact that the "heavens were opened", indicated that the proclamation was public. While God's voice proclaimed publicly the Sonship of Jesus, Jesus was anointed with God-Spirit for His mission outside His home. It was this mission that Jesus Himself announced at the Synagogue, on His return to Nazareth (Lk 4:16 ff). In the OT, the Spirit is said to have

come down on those to whom God entrusted a special and important task to perform (Judges 3:10; Is 11:2; 42:1).

“Abba” experience

The voice from heaven, which is the abode of God, and the descent of the Spirit on Him, points out a theophany which Jesus experienced. It was for Jesus a deep and unique personal experience. His piety, His message, His provocative behaviour and His authority were rooted in that experience, which we call the **“Abba experience”**. It is quite natural for someone who has a similar experience to share it with close friends. Jesus spoke of God as Abba and shared His Abba experience with people through parables and His actions. ‘Father’ of Jesus is a non-patriarchal Father. In Lk 15 we see the Father behaving totally in a non-patriarchal manner. **The original roots in Aramaic do not specify a gender and could be translated ‘divine parent’ (Maternal Father).**

The experience of Jesus of Nazareth at his baptism was an experience of God; a remarkable, free and intimate one. It consists in the image and portrait of God that Jesus had and also in the image Jesus had of himself. Jesus felt he was loved by God, when he was being baptized. It was a remarkable, free and intimate relationship with God. So he could not but articulate that deep and profound experience in an affectionate way. He experienced God as a gracious, tender, compassionate and loving Abba who is attentive to His needs and pains as well as to the needs and pains of human persons. Jesus experienced God as one who also loves all of creation. Perhaps for the first time in the history of the Jews, someone was able to call Yahweh, the God of the Jews, as Abba, a tender, loving, compassionate and gracious daddy.

The scripture scholar John Meir translates ‘Abba’ as ‘my own dear Father’. It shows a religious experience of deep intimacy

with God. The thought of God as Abba filled the consciousness of Jesus. Abba became His main focus. The first (Lk 2:49) and the last (Lk 23:46) recorded words in the life of Jesus were centred on Abba.

In the Gospels, we find the word, “Father” for God in the lips of Jesus 170 times. All four gospel traditions report unanimously without hesitation that Jesus constantly addressed God as ‘My Father’ (except in Mk 15:34). In so doing, Jesus used the Aramaic form “Abba”. “To call God Abba is one of the most outstanding characteristics of the historical Jesus”.¹

Abba shows the language of childhood and the home. It is diminutive of endearment, also used by adults for their own father. To the Jewish mind, Abba expressed accurately the most intimate and personal relationship anyone could think of. It was inconceivable for a Jew to address God as Abba because such an address would not indicate adequate respect for Yahweh, causing scandal to pious persons. They would hesitate to address God directly. They would never say just “Father”.

“Father” in the prayer of Jesus is most unusual and exceptional. Jesus addressed God directly with the word, “Father” (Lk10:21; Jn11:41; except in Mk 15:34) as stated above. By using this word, Jesus revealed the heart of his relationship with God: the simple trust and confidence with which a little child comes to a father who is known, loved, and trusted. Jesus therefore speaks of God as a child with his or her father- simply, intimately, securely.

¹ John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 10545, p 281

Jesus felt he was loved as a beloved son. Jesus felt esteemed affirmed, appreciated and accepted by Abba. He began to love himself from that moment as a loved person. That experience gave him an identity and an inner security. He experienced new courage and determination. He was being energized to love Abba and His cause. He became more enthusiastic for the things of Abba, His reign, His will. He chose to be fully surrendered to this eruption of his deepest, true Spirit. In Jesus we see what happens when we experience the love of God and when we allow the Spirit to have the Spirit's way. It was an extraordinary conversion: handing over of Jesus' life to the Spirit was total. Such a total self-surrender alone freed the inner Spirit and made the space needed for God to act in his life. Jesus' experience was unique objectively. Jesus was nearest to the heart of the Father ("I and the Father are one" (Jn 1:18).

The word 'Abba' encompasses the whole message and claims of Jesus. He came to lead us into relationship with God that would be most adequately expressed with the word Abba. He authorized his disciples to repeat the word Abba after him, We, too, are called to share in his relationship with the Father and also empowered to speak with our heavenly Father in the familiar and trusting way as a child would to a father. This is the new relationship, which opens the door to God's Kingdom. Jesus leads his disciples into an intimacy with God expressed most adequately by being able to address God as Abba. Both Gal 4:6 and Rom 8:15 show us that the cry of Abba is beyond all human capabilities and is only possible within the new relationship with God, given by Jesus, God's beloved Son. Hence, we see that only when under the impulse of the Spirit can we cry, "Abba Father".

Jesus' Abba-experience is revealed in His most brilliant

Jesus' Abba-experience is revealed in His most brilliant parables (e.g. Lk 6; Lk 10; 15.). . John Fuellenbach says that "if we would have nothing of what Jesus said and did except the three stories of Lk 15- the Prodigal Son, the Lost Sheep, and the Lost Coin- we would still have the essence of His message. It portrays God as generous to a fault in his compassion. The outstanding message of these parables is that they reveal to us the true image of God that Jesus came to communicate, a God whose basis for dealing with us is unbelievable compassionate love. The behavior in all three parables is the most unlikely that a reasonable human being would take. By human standards, was the older brother not right? Did the woman not spend more in celebrating with her neighbours than just what she had lost? What responsible shepherd would leave ninety-nine sheep in the desert exposing them to wolves and lions in order to run after a lost one? This is precisely the point Jesus wants to make in these parables: **God acts out of love and not out of rationality or even common sense. Like a true lover God behaves foolishly because God's motive in dealing with us is love alone.** God so loved the world that He gave His only Son for our salvation. This is the good news of God's kingdom, to which Jesus wants us to be converted and in which we are called to believe"².(Emphasis added).

Others have chosen the following three parables as the clearest demonstration of the image of God that Jesus came to reveal: The parable of the Good Employer (Mt 20:1-16); the parable of the Merciful Master (Mt 18:23-35); and the parable of the Unbelievably Merciful Father (Lk 15:11-32) ³

The theological message of these parables and actions is the same. They demonstrate the incomprehensible goodness

² ibid. p 176; ³ ibid. p 176

and kindness of God towards all human beings. So Jesus shows a new order (society) is beginning now, based not just on justice, but on God's goodness and kindness. Justice gets subordinated to the kindness and compassion of God. "Peace is also the fruit of love, because love goes beyond what justice can provide" (*Gaud et Spes*, 78). Jesus is demonstrating that all human beings stand in need of God's kindness and compassion and these will undoubtedly be given to each one at the end. Since this is the case no one can be judge anymore over his or her fellow human being.

Commenting on the parable of the Good Employer (Mt 20:1-6), Joachim Jeremias concludes: "God is depicted as acting like an employer who has compassion for the unemployed and their families. He gives to publicans and sinners a share, all undeserved, in the Kingdom. So will He deal with them on the Last Day. That, says Jesus, is what He is like; and because He is like that, so am I; I am acting under His order and in His stead. Will you then murmur against God's goodness? That is the core of Jesus' vindication of the gospel: Look what God is like- all goodness."³ Because the Father is like that, so is Jesus: all goodness and compassion (Jn 1:18).

The image of God in the ministry of Jesus

The image of God is seen strikingly also in the ministry of Jesus, in his eating and drinking with the outcasts and sinners. He provocatively mixed with them (Mt 9:9-13)- a central feature of Jesus' ministry. Jesus' ministry of table fellowship portrays an understanding of God as gracious and compassionate, embracing even the outcasts, those whose mode of life placed them outside the boundaries of respectability and acceptance in the society. This table

³J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, London: SCM Press, 1963, p 139

fellowship was a parable in action (an action parable) revealing the compassionate God who desires to embrace(include) all human beings in one community of brothers and sisters (law of inclusion).

Jesus compared His Abba experience to a fire: *“I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled”* (Lk 12:49); He spoke of the fire of compassionate love and of righteousness which energized him; fire is energy. He was anointed by the fire of Abba’s compassionate love which energized him to begin his mission on earth.

Jesus’ public life was brief: 2 ½ - 3 years. Moses led his people for 40 years. Buddha taught for 45 years after His enlightenment and Mohammed for 20 years. Because of Jesus’ intense experience of the parental love of God for Him and the whole of creation, people felt as if they were under a spell and left everything to follow Jesus.

St. Pope John Paul 11 said: *“A fire can only be lit by something that is itself on fire. So, too, successful proclamation in Asia of the Good news of salvation can only take place if Bishops, clergy, those in the consecrated life and the laity are themselves on fire with the love of Christ and burning with zeal to make him known more closely.”*⁴

Kingdom of God: A symbolic phrase to express His Abba experience

Jesus expressed his Abba experience in symbolic phrase, “Kingdom of God”. This formula *‘Kingdom of God’* occurs 100 times in the Gospels, 55 times in Mt, 14 times in Mk, 39 times in Lk. It occurs on the lips of Jesus 90 times. It was the central theme of his preaching, teaching and ministry e.g Mk 1:14-15; 26-30; Mt 13:44-47. Jesus’ message of the

⁴ John Paul 11, *Ecclesia in Asia*, Vatican City, no 23).

Kingdom consists in His image of God: God loves human beings and infra-human beings with unconditional love.

This rich biblical symbol helped Jesus to understand and to articulate the nature of his vision and mission to Israel. The notion of God's coming rule and its impact on the life of God's people was an image forged over a long period of Israel's history. Though this image/metaphor was current at the time of Jesus, it was not a dominant one in Jewish theology. But Jesus had deliberately chosen this theme as the most suitable for expressing the meaning of His mission. This symbol could have many nuances and interpretations.

This symbol had broad traditional meaning in the consciousness of Israel. **The ultimate source of the kingdom metaphor at its deepest level was the saving relationship between Yahweh and His people.** Israel experienced God as a saving God who rescued it from the slavery in Egypt, forged a covenant, and brought His people to a land of promise. This same God was recognized as the "ONE GOD" who ruled the universe and all peoples. From the covenant bond between Israel and Yahweh sprang the reservoir of hope of the O.T. Despite, and to an extent because of, the failure of human institutions such as monarchy and priesthood, Israel looked to the future vindication of its hopes by God alone. A new and perfect temple would be built, a worthy anointed servant would lead the people; God would establish His rule. In other words, from Israel's conviction that God had ultimate authority over the life of His people and was intent on rescuing His people from all evil developed the metaphor of the "Coming of the Kingdom of God"⁵ (Emphasis added)

Although Jesus' use of the phrase KINGDOM OF GOD as

⁵ Donald Senior, CP, Carrol Stuhlmueller, CP, *The Biblical Foundation for Mission*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 10545, pp 144-151.

the centre of his proclamation and mission was unique, it was based on the religious experience of his people. The God of OT is a compassionate God, a God who cares, loves, forgives. Every parable that Jesus offered is a vivid witness to this God. His audience could at least sense and in some way participate in the 'new experience' Jesus offered, because the parables He employed constantly referred to Israel's experience with Yahweh in the past. For us it is important not to forget that the OT God – experience, expressed in the symbol KINGDOM OF GOD-, remains present in the New Testament. To evoke and participate in this "old experience" has value for our own participation in the KINGDOM as Jesus experienced it.

We do not find Jesus' definition of the Kingdom of God in N.T. Jesus described the KINGDOM in parables and similes (Mt 13; Mk 4) "What Jesus meant by this metaphor must be deduced from the overall message of his preaching, his lifestyle, his commitments. So it is important to keep in mind the comprehensive scope of the Kingdom theme. Jesus' parables about a gracious God, his fellowship with outcasts and women, his healings and exorcisms., his conflicts over the interpretation of law, all of these became a cumulative definition of what the Kingdom of God meant." ⁶

John Fuellenbach in his book, *The Kingdom of God* says that the best biblical description of the Kingdom is given by Paul (Rom.14: 17). He says that some authors regard this text as the only definition of the Kingdom of God ever attempted in the entire N.T. The constant danger has been to interpret these words exclusively in a private, individual, interior spiritual sense and overlook its basic concepts like "righteousness, peace and joy which are equally meant for the life of the

⁶ Ibid. pp 144-151

Christians in the here and now.

The best description seems to be that the Kingdom of God in Jesus' message is God's unconditional love for creation. This love, revealed in Jesus Christ, has the sole purpose of leading all human beings and ultimately all of creation to participation in God's own life and love.

Christian Spirituality: New Hope for us

The decision at His baptism made Jesus publicly committed and this was the beginning of his life of being 'driven by the Spirit'. This Spirit never let Him rest. The Spirit drove Him into the wilderness for 40 days. He was tempted. Jesus found himself wrestling with God's demands and with God's vision. But He did not 'miss the point'; 'He did not miss the mark' of His life-commitment. What is sin? It is to miss the mark or to be 'wide of the target'. Jesus never missed the target; He never missed the point of his life. He was tempted but kept saying 'yes' to his God, and God's will and to the love He had publicly committed himself to live. He never sinned (Heb 2:17-18). He never said 'I can't and will not continue'. We are fascinated by what drove Jesus of Nazareth. Let us try to understand what drove His life and so catch a sense of the ideals that filled Him. Let us begin to sense the dreams, the vision that inspired Him and the failures and defeats that humanized Him. Jesus began His public journey of following the lead of the Spirit. He chose to become implicated in God's plan (Heb5:8-9).

In the story of Jesus' life there is hope for us, because, in His human nature He has shown how one human person can be possessed by God's spirit. Jesus embodied the human potential. Therefore the implications for us are enormous. Not

that we will ever embody the Spirit in the complete way as Jesus did but we are flesh of His flesh. He became like us. This is the ground of all our hope. We are caught up in his deepest challenge. He needed to face the issues of His time; He needed to make public commitment at baptism, the moment symbolizing conversion. There is no other way except baptism of the Spirit if we wish to follow Jesus, who is the WAY for all of us.

The spirituality of Jesus, rooted in his interpersonal intimate relationship with God (ABBA), inspires the Christians and others in today's world in their concrete historical situations. Christian spirituality therefore unites people and nature. St. John expressed it as a fellowship or union with God resulting also in the union between all Christians. St. Paul became 'intoxicated' with the love of Jesus Christ and so Christ's love was burning in him, moving him to bring the Jews and the Greeks together. Central to the Christian spirituality therefore is the inclusiveness, the gathering together of the scattered children of God (Jn 11:52). This calling to a gathering together of the scattered goes beyond the Church.

- Needed conversion to the image of God that Jesus came to communicate: viz from a "judge" image to a "compassionate" image of God.
- Needed a shift from emphasis on sin, guilt and punishment to the unconditional / compassionate love of God.
- Needed a shift from "knowledge about God" (head) to "experience of God" (heart).

TO PONDER

- Given the meaning of baptism ('to be overwhelmed', or 'to be submerged'), how do we 'overwhelm' ourselves with the story of Jesus today?

2.

FIVE DISCIPLINES OF DISCIPLESHIP

Lk 9: 51- 62 portrays some disciplines that are important for us who are disciples of Jesus Christ. These disciplines are portrayed in the life of Jesus but are now to be applied in our own lives. Let us look at each of them.

1. PURPOSEFULNESS

The text says Jesus resolutely determined to go to Jerusalem to suffer, die and rise. He was heading there to undertake the great mission entrusted to Him by Abba. Everything Jesus did was oriented towards this goal. Jesus was courageous, daring and fearless to fulfill the mission entrusted to Him.

What about us? Are we resolute in our determination to seek Jesus Christ and His mission? First of all, who is Jesus for you and for me? Is He just an idea and a notion? Are we convinced that we are anointed and consecrated in the sacrament of baptism for a difficult mission? Is our goal desirable and clear? Are we focused? Purposeful and single-hearted in our determination to follow Jesus? Are we asking Jesus to lead us where we should be heading or do we compromise with the passing world seeking to serve other masters?

St. Paul speaks of forgetting those things which are behind and pressing forward towards the mark for the price of the high calling of God in Jesus Christ (Phil 3:13). St. James says, “a double minded person is unstable in all her/his ways” (Jm 1:4). No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and mammon (Mt 6:24). The psalmist prays, “There is one thing I ask of the Lord, this alone I seek: that I may dwell In the house of the Lord all the days of my life and gaze upon

the beauty of the Lord” (Ps 27:4).

The first discipline of discipleship is to be purposeful, determined, single-minded and focused in our pursuit of the Lord and His Kingdom (reign of love).

2. PERSEVERANCE

We are told in the Lukan text (9:51-62) that Jesus and His disciples experienced rejection in a Samaritan village because they were on their way to Jerusalem and that Jesus rebuked the desire of James and John, the sons of thunder, for retaliation. Though rejected in the Samaritan village, Jesus moved forward. He did not allow that (rejection) to distract Him or His disciples from the task of proclaiming the Good News of salvation. Jesus persevered...kept moving forward.

Jesus tells us that at times we will be hated and rejected. Like James and John, we too might become agitated and aggressive when people reject us. We need to persevere in our resolve and equanimity, not just in the face of rejection, but also in the face of trails, temptations, setbacks, sorrows, hurts, hardships, failures and frustrations. Trusting in Jesus, we need to continue to preach, teach, instruct, guide, warn, admonish and care.

Jesus says, “You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the person who endures to the end will be saved. .. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next” (Mt 10:14, 22).

Yes, we are called to persevere. We are called to be faithful to our mission, not to seek success or adulation. Many people have announced the end of Christian faith. Many have sworn that they will bury the Church. But the Christians have outlived every opponent. People misled by leaders killed Jesus but He rose invincible and ever victorious.

3. SIMPLE LIFE-STYLE

The text says that someone told Jesus that he would follow Jesus wherever Jesus went. But Jesus' reply to him was: "*The Son of man has nowhere to lay His head*" (Lk 9:58). Here we have another critical discipline of discipleship. The following of Jesus requires avoiding worldly gain and prestige.

Christian discipleship requires readiness to follow Jesus if and when worldly gain and prestige not only escape us but are taken away from us. Following of Jesus requires simple life-style, freedom from the snares of power, popularity, greediness for possessions, and comfort. What if following Jesus brings us no earthly gain but misunderstanding, ridicule, loss of privileges and favors?

The prospective disciple according to the Text seems to have had power, prestige or worldly gain in mind. Perhaps he saw Jesus as a political messiah and wanted to get into His group. Jesus warned him that worldliness is not what discipleship is about. It is enemy number one. Greediness for riches, power and social prestige often hinders us from our Christian discipleship. Simple life style and freedom from the trap of greediness for things / possessions is necessary for living our Christian discipleship.

Jesus is pointing out the need for powerlessness in worldly matters when one is called to discipleship. Even today, there will be persons who seek Christian discipleship for wrong reasons – power, prestige, wealth, recognition, popularity etc.

There is a call to trust in God's providence and practice the "ethic of enough" as a disciple of Jesus. A spirit of detachment from worldliness is needed.

4. PROMPTNESS / READINESS

According to the text quoted, Jesus said to another person, “follow me”. But he replied, “Lord, let me go first and bury my father”. But Jesus answered, “Let the dead bury their dead. But you go and proclaim the Kingdom of God”.

Note that the text can be understood in the following way: ‘My father is getting older. I want to wait until he dies and then I will really be able to devote myself to being a disciple’. Jesus’ perception is that if a person didn’t have this excuse, he did have some other one. He didn’t have a prompt and a willing spirit to follow Jesus.

We too can always find some reason for not following wholeheartedly because we have to get a few things resolved first. Yes, for some Christians it is often a familiar problem: **Postponement...Procrastination.** I’ll do it later.

Addiction to internet, mobile phones, TV etc can make us to procrastinate. The good that we can be done at a given - moment is often postponed and that moment never comes back. We miss opportune moments which can bring much grace, joy and peace.

Now is the time of salvation. Kingdom of God is at hand... Repent now. Lost opportunities will never come back. Promptness / readiness is a discipline necessary for disciples of Jesus Christ. “Come now, and let us reason together, says the LORD (Is 1:18) “[...] Behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:2). Promptness is a discipline of discipleship. It is a gift to joyfully run to what God promises and calls without delay.

5. PERMANENCE

The text says, another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but first

let me say farewell to my family at home”. To him Jesus said, “No one who sets a hand to the plough and looks to what was left behind, is fit for the Kingdom of God”(Lk 9:62). Our experience of Jesus Christ should mean that we have set our hearts on Him and therefore left certain things behind.

We are not to return to those things which will be harmful like bad habits, ruinous relationships, perilous addictions and harmful competitiveness and rivalry.

Advice of St. Paul: “Put off your old nature which belongs to your former way of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts and be renewed in the spirit of your minds and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4: 22- 24). St. Peter wrote: “Make every effort to make permanent your calling” (2 Pet 1: 10).

Permanence is a discipline of Christian discipleship for the married, the Consecrated Religious and for the ordained ministers in the Church. In the Sacrament of holy matrimony, the spouses vow to live together in mutual conjugal love till their death.

St. Eugene de Mazenod speaking on the profession of vows had stressed very much the importance of the oblation. They are free not to advance that far, but this consecration cannot be revoked. It is perpetual. It is not without reason that this sacred commitment is made in the presence of Jesus Christ, the divine Master who approves it by his holy Body and His precious Blood.

The above-mentioned five disciplines are not mere values but are virtues. Often we preach values and at times they remain as mere notions in our heads, without being made into good actions, good habits and good virtues.

We need to be relentlessly holy and zealous missionary disciples of Jesus in today’s world.

3.

WHATEVER GOOD WE DO TO THE NEEDY, IS DONE TO JESUS

Same word *Abad* is used in the Bible to serve God (worship), to serve one another and to serve the earth (co-create the world with God). True worship of Yahweh was justice practiced towards the poor as the prophets reminded the people of Israel (Mt 23: 23-24).¹

Jesus is present in the neighbour-in-need, in the least of his brothers and sisters (Mt 25) and the victims of injustice (Lk 10). Poor people and every victim of human oppression is identified with Jesus Christ offering an opportunity for salvation (eternal life) on condition we serve that person (Mt 25:40; Lk 10:25-28, 37). In Mt 25, love of neighbour is seen to be in practice the same love of God. When we do acts of compassion to them, we are doing those compassionate actions to God. Compassion is the core of Christian discipleship. By the way we live and work in imitation of Jesus Christ, we witness to God's compassionate love in the world. Regarding our compassionate actions for the poor and the needy, South African Theologian Albert Nolan, OP has said what Jesus had in mind was something more than mere almsgiving or what we call 'charity'.

What is referred to in Mt 25 is the solidarity of kinship.

¹Aloysius Pieris, SJ, *A Gist of Jesuitness*, Tulana Jubilee Publication, Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, 2015, pp 3-15

The bond of kinship is the origin of the love of neighbour in the Hebrew Scriptures (OT). In Leviticus, your neighbour is your kinsman or kinswoman (Lev 19:18). One was expected to love them as you love your very self. This can be extended to the stranger, the foreigner who lives with you (Lev 19: 34; Dt 10: 18:19) but not to anyone else and certainly not to your enemies. Jesus extended the bond of kinship or solidarity to the whole human race, even to the enemies. “But I say to you, love your enemies” (Mt 5: 43-44).

For St. Paul, love of neighbour sums up the whole of revelation (Rom 13:8-10; Col 3: 14; Gal 5:13-14). St. John says without loving the neighbour one cannot know God (1 Jn 4: 7-8; James 2:8). Therefore we need to believe in the presence of God / Christ in the human beings. True prayer life is always accompanied by a faith that recognizes the real presence of God / Christ in the human persons. Intimacy with Christ in prayer leads to service of the people, to care for people. On Mount Tabor, Jesus told Peter it was necessary to go down to meet people who were waiting for him, instead of building comfortable abodes for him on the mountains (Lk 9: 28-34). The plight of individuals and groups always stirred the heart of Jesus and moved Him to reach out in consoling, feeding, healing and forgiving ways.

The Pharisees and the Elders of the people did not have that faith and that spirituality. For them this doctrine of selfless service through love was blasphemous.

Whatever good that was done to another human person, Jesus experienced that, as done to Himself. The challenge is loud and clear. To follow Jesus today is to identify so completely

with all my human brothers and sisters that I am able to say “whatever I do to any of them, I do to Jesus”. “The identification is objective and real. God is one with all human beings and we are one with one another, whether we are aware of it or not (Albert Nolan, OP).

Jesus had preferential love for the neglected people. Sometimes our love becomes more optional (against people who make others poor) than preferential (to side with a just cause). Sharing out of love means more than giving to the poor out of one’s abundance. The spirit of solidarity embodies sharing, caring, consoling, comforting and forgiving and thereby creating communities (Acts 4: 32-35).

Loving embodies working for justice. Our mother earth, our new neighbour, wounded by greedy persons and organisations, deserve our loving care. Hence there is a call to work for social justice and eco-justice. “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel” (*The Roman Synod* of 1971).

Living in a pre-scientific and pre-industrial age, Jesus did not experience nature (creation) as a resource to be exploited or as a machine to be manipulated. Jesus experienced all of nature as God’s creation (Mt 6:26-30 par ; Mt 5:45 par). Like Abba, Jesus too cared for creation. Look at the way He wondered at the lilies in the field, the birds of the air and even the grass in the valleys.

4.

BECOMING MISSIONARY DISCIPLES OF JESUS IN TODAY'S SOCIETY

Jesus told the Apostles: “I give you a new commandment: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must love one another. By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples” (John 13:34-35). Fran Ferder and John Heagle writing in their book,¹ say that Jesus had a wide list of possibilities to choose from in deciding what would be the identifying sign of discipleship. Given His Jewish prophetic roots, He could have named justice as the benchmark of a faithful life. ...As a member of the priestly people of Israel, he could have held up worship and sacred ritual as the cornerstone of religious observance. But Jesus chose *love*.

In the mind of Jesus, love of neighbour is just like the love of God (Mt 22:37-40). To the lawyer who wanted to know in what way he could inherit eternal life, Jesus related to him the parable of the Good Samaritan, advising him to go, and do deeds of loving service. (Luke 10: 29-37). “Loving my neighbour as myself is all that is enjoined by the Scriptures for my salvation because in the mind of Jesus, love of neighbour is “just like” the love of God (Mt 22:37). “Treating one’s neighbour as one would like to be treated” sums up the Law and the Prophets (Mt 7:12; Rom 13:8-10; Gal 5:14;

¹Fran Ferder and John Heagle, *Tender Fires*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, NY 10001, 2002, p 190,

Ja 2:8). “In the Last Judgment (Mt 25:36-41) salvation is offered to the “nations” (i.e those who have not acknowledged YHWH as their Lord) on the basis of love expressed through one’s service to the needy humans.”² Love is the summit of Christian discipleship. Therefore Jesus wants us to shun indifference and learn to love gratuitously (cf. Lk 6:32-36). In today’s context, wounded creation (nature) also has become our neighbour, claiming our caring love and service.

Neighbourly love is a virtue

Neighbourly love is not merely a value or a mere request of Jesus only to be appreciated and preached. Certainly not! It is a *virtue* that should be practiced in concrete situations as good deeds of caring and serving the people in real need. For Jesus Christ, love and service are inextricably connected. Jesus Himself has taught us that love that brings salvation to us is that which makes us lay down our life for others (John 15: 13). It is sacrificial love. Jesus not only taught and preached about sacrificial love, He taught it also by His actions. In the spirit of humility, He bent down before the Apostles and washed their feet like a slave thereby requesting us to copy His example (Jn 13:14-15). Our spirituality and our mission require that we spread neighbourly love by word and deed.

Neighbourly love includes also enemy love

In the heart of Jesus, neighbourly love included also enemy

²Aloysius Pieris, SJ, *A Gist of Jesuitness*, Tulana Jubilee Publication, Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, 2015, p11

love. To heroically love my friends and to forgivingly love my enemies are the two loving requests of Jesus dying on the Cross. Jesus, who wanted His disciples to love one another as He has loved them, also preached publicly, “You have heard how it was said; you will love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say this to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”(Mt 5: 43-45).

Neighbourly love promotes justice

Neighbourly love also demands that the disciples of Jesus Christ commit themselves to promote social and ecological justice in actual situations. Nature (creation) has become our new neighbour. Therefore such a commitment to social and eco-justice demands a biblical spirituality of love that motivates and energises the Christians to promote and nurture genuine humanness of people and integrity of creation as well as resist whatever oppresses and violates dignity of human beings and the integrity of creation. Such spirituality will also help to narrow the widening gap between the affluent few and the struggling many and help also to eradicate the existing marginalization of the poor and social inequality which in the words of Pope Francis will cause violence.

The actual situation of the migrants in Europe has made the Pope to speak and act courageously on their behalf and our Sri Lankan bishop Raymond Wickramasinghe of Galle diocese has shown his concern for the plight of the plantation workers in his diocese by appealing to the Members of the Trade Unions and the Regional Plantation Companies to bring about a just solution to the long awaited Wage Increase and other

social problems of the plantation workers (*Diocesan News Letter*, Feb. 2019, Vol. 14, pg 6). Promoting the inviolable, inalienable and universal dignity of the human beings is a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Word of God. In working for social and ecological justice, we need to adopt non-violent approaches.

Need of Prayer to love

“It is not those who say to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven”, says Jesus (Matt. 7:21). The will of the Father is that we love one another as Jesus has loved us (John 13:34-35). If love for one another is the summit of Christian discipleship and it is the passport to heaven, what is the place of prayer for a baptized Christian?

Prayer is a means necessary for the practice of the new requests of Jesus. Prayer which is intimacy with the Risen Lord Jesus Christ is necessary because it will energize us to transcend also our self-love as well in order to practice the virtue of neighbourly love and forgiving love. Such a prayer life and self-transcendence was visible in the lives of saints.

The gospel tells us that the divine intimacy experienced in prayer enables us to love and care for others and thereby fulfill the will of God. Jesus at prayer is a favourite theme in the gospel of St. Luke. He mentions that Jesus after His baptism, was at prayer (3/21). St. Luke in his gospel shows in a special way that there was a very close connection between Jesus’ prayer life and His ministry of neighbourly love and

forgiving love. St. Mark also shows how Jesus' prayer life energized Him to love, care and heal those in need (1: 35-39).

Prayer: intimate relationship with God and Christ

In our prayer life, we do with God / Jesus Christ what we do with friends in forming, nurturing intimate relationships and connectedness. St. Theresa of Avila said, "Being with the One who loves me" is prayer. In friendship, there is always sharing of ideas, perceptions, insights, struggles, temptations and secrets. In the process of forming human friendship and connectedness, one may experience also the element of vulnerability – the fear of getting hurt (betrayed, forsaken and rejected). But, in one's friendship with God / Jesus Christ, there cannot be fear of rejection or betrayal because God and Jesus Christ are trustworthy.

Jesus tells us what He told His Apostles, "I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father" (John 15: 15-16). Jesus had learnt from the Father the essential life-giving message, namely the love-message, to make known to the Apostles and also to us His followers. Prayer is efficacious. "Ask and you will receive that your joy may be complete" (Jn 16:24).

Personal prayer and community prayer

We need to pray alone and also with others. Jesus said, "*When you pray, go to your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you*"(Mt 6:6). Jesus taught the Apostles to pray,

saying, “**our Father** who art in heaven....” (Mt 6:9-13). He also said, “*I tell you solemnly once again, if two of you on earth agree to ask anything at all, it will be granted to you by my Father in heaven*”(Mt 18:19). (Acts 1: 14).

Apostolate: an overflow of the divine intimacy

It is to hear and learn from the Father the essential life-giving message of love that Jesus of Nazareth often spent quality time with Abba. St. Mark tells us that Jesus, long before dawn, got up and left the house and went off to a lonely place to pray (Mk 1 35). Jesus went to a quiet environment to hear, listen and taste the love of Abba and to be fired by that love. Commenting on this text, spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen in his book, “*Out of solitude*”, says Jesus came out of His prayer not only to cure but also to care for people. Jesus’ ministry of love and mercy on earth was an overflow of the intimacy He had with Abba in His prayer life, the compassionate and merciful maternal Father of all the people.

St. Vincent de Paul: “*It is our duty to prefer the service to the poor to everything else and to offer such service as quickly as possible. If a needy person requires medicine or other help during prayer time, do whatever has to be done with peace of mind. Offer the deed to God as your prayer. Do not become upset or feel guilty because you interrupted your prayer to serve the poor. God is not neglected if you leave him for such service. One of God’s works is merely interrupted so that another can be carried out. So when you leave prayer to serve some poor person, remember that this very service is performed for God. Charity is certainly greater than any rule.*

Moreover all rules must lead to charity” (St. Vincent de Paul, Epist. 2546: Correspondance, entretiens, documents, Paris 1922-1925,7).

According to Aloysius Pieris, SJ the tendency to equate spirituality with mystical contemplation of God and relegate action on behalf of one’s neighbour to an holy extra is a heresy. What Jesus disapproved in Martha was not her service (diakonia) as such but that she was distracted by her work and unable to listen to the Word that Mary was listening to.³

St. John wrote to his Christian community, saying, “We communicate to you what we have touched” (1 John1:1-4). We need therefore to learn from Jesus the art of cultivating divine intimacy which will make us also say to the people, “we communicate what we have heard, learnt and experienced by being with the Risen Lord Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3|). John the Apostle was able to tell his Christian community what he himself had experienced after spending quality time in the company of Jesus. No one can give to others what s/he does not have. How can we communicate love to people if we are not filled with it? How can we love others if we have not experienced God’s love through Jesus Christ? That is why St. John Paul II said: *“A fire can only be lit by something that is itself on fire. So, too, successful proclamation in Asia of the Good News of salvation can only take place if Bishops, clergy, those in the consecrated life and the laity are themselves on fire with the love of Christ and burning with*

³ ibid, , p 68,

zeal to make Him known more widely, loved more deeply and followed more closely”⁴.

Quality time for prayer-life

Each one of us (married or ordained minister or vowed Religious or single) need to spend **quality time** in order to experience personally the intimacy with God /Jesus Christ and to be fired by enthusiasm to spread Abba’s unconditional love. **Left-over time** given to prayer life will not enable one to experience inner freedom and openness that are necessary to listen to the Spirit of God who wants to communicate a divine message. Prayer brings an overshadowing of the Spirit.

Spending left-over time in prayer can lead to godlessness, lovelessness, spiritual fruitlessness, loneliness, depression, anxiety and hopelessness in our Christian life. Often crisis in Christian life (of the clerics, the married and the vowed Religious) also begins when quality time (sufficiently freed from distractions, addictions etc.) is not given to prayer life. Living a committed life cannot be sustained by anyone who does not take time to be touched and energized by Jesus. We hear Jesus telling us, “Remain in my love” so your joy will be complete (John 15:9-11). Energised and moved by the spirit of love of Jesus, one can love others joyfully as Jesus had loved and thereby fulfill the will of God. By fulfilling the will of God one will also flourish as a disciple of Jesus and make others also to flourish.

⁴ St. John Paul 11, *Ecclesia in Asia*, Vatican City, p23

5.

WHY ARE WE, FOLLOWERS OF JESUS? WHAT IS OUR CHRISTIAN IDENTITY?

When we read the Gospels, we find Jesus who came from the middle class of His time, associating socially with the poor, the abandoned and the dejected, relieving every kind of human need, pain and infirmity since He was moved with compassion.¹ People with physical disability, the lame, the maimed, the blind, the dumb and, many others were laid at the feet of Jesus and He cured them. Jesus was concerned about people's bodily needs just as He was for emotional and spiritual needs. Moved with compassion, He mixed with the people who were excluded from participating in religious and social activities because they were considered unclean like the lepers.

Jesus, a Servant God

Jesus, not only practiced the virtue of compassionate love, He also preached about compassion (Mt 9:13; Lk 6:36). Through the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37), Jesus is teaching us how to show compassion. Through feet-washing (Jn 13:13-15), He is giving us an example how to be His servant – disciples in self-sacrificing gesture to serve others.

When Jesus was no longer with His disciples in the world

¹Albert Nolan, OP, *Jesus before Christianity*, St. Paul Press, Bangalore, India., 2007. pp 51-53).

physically, St. Paul gave a good example to express the mystery of God's compassion when he wrote in the Epistle to the Philippians (1: 8). He used a profound expression namely, **“Servant God.”** In Jesus, God is a Servant-God who is with us to serve and make us flourish and to have eternal life.

How did Jesus become so passionate and compassionate?

We will never recognize Jesus as a compassionate Saviour and Life-giver if we eliminate from the life of Jesus, His special, unique relationship with God, His Abba. It is precisely in this intimacy with God that the origin and the power of His compassionate way of life and His message were rooted. Such an intimate experience born out of Jesus' prayer life gave him passion for God (Abba) and compassion for people.

Jesus in His dying was not concerned with His own identity as the Son of God and with His survival. His identity was to identify Himself with the people as God (Abba's) own highest value. According to the Dominican theologian, Albert Nolan of South Africa, Jesus did not die for a cause but for people. This is what He lived for and that is what He died for. Therefore, we, the Christians, follow Jesus because He was sent by God to provide fuller life to human beings (Jn 3;!6; 10:10) and He fulfilled this mission of compassionate love on earth, doing good to people. Another Dominican theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx said Jesus was executed, evidently because he had spoken of a God who was concerned for

humanity and who therefore required men to be concerned for their fellow men.²

Doing good invited rejection

Jesus went about doing good to people (Acts 10:18). Doing good to people in need, feeding the hungry, respecting and promoting their human dignity, social equality, forgiving sinners and caring for their growth invited opposition, jealousy, rejection and threats from the Pharisees and the High Priests. They accused Jesus saying, “Look at him, a glutton, a drunkard, a friend of the tax collectors and sinners” (Mt 11:19; Lk 7:33-34). Jesus was on trial at the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Supreme Religious Council of High Priests, Lawyers and Elders) because He was manifesting compassionate love to the excluded and marginalized people (the prostitutes, tax collectors, sinners, shepherds, lepers, the poor, the children). Jesus had no apologies, no regrets for being a friend and companion of such people. He was born to enable people to feel esteemed, respected and experience togetherness. That was His mission of compassionate love. When he was challenged by the Religious leaders, Jesus declared, “I did not come to call the virtuous but sinners” (Mt 2:12; Lk 5:32). To illustrate this message, Jesus related the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Lk 18:10-14).

Jesus was executed because He was compassionate and went about caring for people in pain. Jesus told the people, “Be

² Edward Schillebeeckx, OP, *Christ, the Christian Experience in the Modern World*, Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1980, p 840

compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate” (Lk 6: 36). Compassion is associated with sharing the suffering of someone else and being moved by that suffering to do something good.

Our Christian Identity

Today, living in a competitive society where people are recognized and honoured by people’s differences, we, as Christians, are called to imitate Jesus by entering into solidarity of compassion, publicly and visibly, with the suffering masses. Being with people in pain speaks louder than words. What people going through painful experiences need most is compassion and consolation, not explanation, says spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen. Therefore, being with people in need of freedom, inclusion and equality in today’s society, we, the Christians, need to resist non-violently the forces of oppression and facilitate the process of growth so that the oppressed too may enjoy fuller life. By our belongingness to Jesus and by our faithfulness to His compassionate way of life and His message, we too glorify God, our Abba.

An example of Christian Discipleship

By his life and ministry, Jesus showed also the nature of discipleship of his followers. He had set an example of discipleship through feet-washing. That was the sign of servanthood. So the Church – the people of God, namely the lay faithful, the ordained ministers and the consecrated Religious – is called to serve the Kingdom of God by being the servant of the people in the world. By serving the people,

the Reign (Kingdom) of God is promoted. In other words, the Church of Jesus Christ is ontologically or by its very nature a servant-Church. The cost of such a discipleship is death to and displacement of certain values like power, wealth and prestige. The basic authority of the mission is not lording over others or territories but serving others in humility and friendship.

TO INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE

“In the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus shows that the Levite and the Priest who claimed to be very “spiritual people” serving in the temple (the place of ‘worship’) and claiming to believe in YHWH, failed to love whereas the apostate Samaritan (a non-believer) could *inherit eternal life*, because he exercised neighbourly love to a stranger in utter distress” (Lk. 10:29-37).- Aloysius Pieris,sj, *The Missionary Oblate*, July-Dec., 2021, p 19

6

EUCHARIST: LIFE OF SHARING AND CARING

The Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist have special importance for the lives of Christians. At Baptism, a person professes to be a disciple of Jesus and follow Him. In other words, the baptized person professes to become fully mature with the spirit of Jesus Christ (Eph 4:13). Such a profession includes participation in the self-sacrificing life of Jesus Christ which culminated in His Passion, Death and Resurrection (Rom 6:3-11).

Through Baptism one becomes a priestly person to celebrate the Eucharist. Eucharist is God willing life for the disciples of Jesus Christ. Therefore, Eucharistic celebration has always had a primary place in the Catholic Christian community since it nurtures and strengthens the baptismal commitment to Jesus Christ. Even during the lockdown due to spreading of COVID-19 virus, the Catholics felt the dearth of the Eucharist and were longing to participate in the Eucharistic celebration.

We have the earliest record of the Last Supper of Jesus in St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 11:23-26). The early Christians gathered spontaneously at the risk of their lives on the first day (Sunday) of the week (1 Cor 16:2; Acts 20:7) because they felt that the Lord's Supper was indispensable for living as Christians. They came together on that day (Sunday) because it was on that day Jesus was raised from the dead by God: the Day of the Risen Lord.. Therefor Sunday is the Sabbath for the Christians.

Eucharist means thanksgiving. Therefore, gathering on Sundays, the Christians thanked God as a community for the

gift of Jesus and His body and blood as spiritual food and spiritual medicine in order to maintain the spiritual quality of life as disciples of Jesus. The Document on the Church of the 2nd Vatican Council presents Eucharist as an important means to holiness.

Two Requests of Jesus

We have two ardent requests made by Jesus at the Last Supper, namely *'Love one another as I have loved you'* and *'Do this in remembrance of me'*. Fulfillment of these loving requests will bring eternal life. Hence Eucharistic celebration becomes an act of loving obedience to Jesus and an invitation to serve others with love.

Loving Remembrance

Remembrance is a sign of love. We do remember the people who have loved us and continue to love us. We renew this remembrance through personal contacts, visits, letter-writing, phone calls and also using digital technology etc. If those persons who had loved us are dead, we do remember them also during the Eucharistic celebration.

Remembering in the Holy Bible is not just a mental exercise but it is related to action. The Book of Numbers 15:40 tells the people to remember all the commandments – not just to memorise and keep in mind but to observe them.

Remembering, therefore, makes something happen now in the present.

The Israelites remembered the great doings of God, namely their rescue from slavery in Egypt – the Exodus event (Deut 7:18-23) - in the liturgies. In that way they experienced the liberation of their ancestors. In the light of the biblical meaning of remembrance we too are able to understand the words of Jesus *"Do this in remembrance of me* (1 Cor 11:23-

25). The direct meaning is that in the future, the disciples will remember Jesus in what they do, not only liturgically but by serving others with love like Jesus and thereby obtain also an experience of joy in this world and eternal life one day.

What did Jesus do at the Last supper?

It was in the act of passing the broken bread and the cup of wine among those at table that Jesus proclaimed these words, *“Do this in remembrance of me”*. Having gathered together, we are to share bread (food) and wine (drink) among ourselves just as Jesus did with His disciples at the Last supper. During the Eucharistic celebration, we share liturgically. At the Last Supper, Jesus said that the bread He was sharing with His disciples is His body. According to Jewish mentality and manner of expression, a human body is primarily a person. Therefore when Jesus said, “This is my body”, He meant “This is myself...With this bread I am giving myself. This bread is the sign (sacrament) of myself sacrificed for you”.

The Jews thought that life was located in the blood (Lev 17:11). To shed blood meant giving up one's life. The wine being poured out and shared by Jesus was a sign (sacrament) of Jesus' life which had been sacrificed (1 Cor. 11:25). So bread and wine symbolise Jesus' Self (His body) given up and His life (blood) sacrificed in love for the people. These symbols sum up the whole life of Jesus, namely His words, actions, decisions and commitments for the well-being of the people – His self-sacrificing life till the event of the Cross. That is why Jesus had already proclaimed: “Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life...He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in him”(Jn 6:54,56).

In St. John's gospel, it is said that Jesus had prepared the Last

Supper just as a servant does for his master. He had taken the form of a servant-host and washed the feet of the Apostles and went back to the table and told them, “I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done.” Since Jesus had performed an action of a Jewish slave, Peter, himself a Jew, didn’t want Jesus, his Lord and Master to behave like a slave. This explains his strong reaction. St. Paul writing to the Philippians said that Jesus had become a *servant God* and that he, Paul, had made himself the slave of everyone (1 Cor 9:19). Let us continue to remember Jesus, our feet-washing Saviour, by living for others selflessly in a spirit of humility.

Sharing and Caring

The biological experience of taking in the species of bread and wine and also caring for others selflessly in humility are made conditions for obtaining fuller human life of dignity, esteem, equality and social integration and also eternal life one day (Jn 6:51-54; Lk 10:25-35; Mt 25:31-46). What Jesus wanted was that His disciples remember Him by doing what He did, by acquiring His experience of living and dying for others. Therefore, the disciples of Jesus are called, not only to remember Jesus in liturgy, by breaking of bread and sharing the cup by coming together, but also by proclaiming in life what it signifies, namely Jesus’ mission of love for God and people. We need to follow Jesus’ pattern of life and generous self-giving which motivated His whole life and ultimately His death. That is why Jesus said: “Love one another as I have loved you. No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:12 -13).

In the early Church, fellowship experienced by the Christians in the Eucharistic celebration was to serve as a reminder to be generous towards others (1Cor 16: 1-2). Sharing financial resources among them became a sign of their spiritual *koinonia* (community love), Jn 2:15-16). However, at Corinth,

Eucharistic celebrations had become mere external rituals bereft of real meaning namely caring love for others. St. Paul mentions that such practices did exist when Christian came for Eucharistic celebrations at Corinth due to the formation of factions that caused embarrassment to the poor (1 Cor11:17-21). During the Eucharistic celebration, soon after invoking the Holy Spirit of God to change the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus, the priest –presbyter prays to the Holy Spirit of God, saying ‘may we become one body, one spirit in Christ’. Eucharist is the sacrament of unity of the Christians who are called to share with the needy.

Living for others in today’s world

To live the Eucharist contextually in our life-situations, we need to hear the Word of God coming to us also through the lives of people and natural environment. We need to look carefully and visit the environment (natural and human) near and far, to heed the cries of unreached people and of the polluted and damaged nature.

There are people in our parishes, in our dioceses, in our country who are in pain and in want, unemployed or under-employed, looking for jobs to sustain themselves and their families. There are people who are looking for shelter to lead a dignified family life. There are people crying for deliverance from oppression and exclusion. There are people hungering for dignity and equality There are parents who are struggling to provide a meaningful education to their children to lead a dignified life in the society. The sick, without the purchasing power, are looking for financial assistance to obtain suitable medical care. There are many people who are hungering for the Word of God and spiritual empowerment. The disciples of Jesus – the Eucharistic people - need to hear the cry of these people.

Eucharistic spirituality requires that the ordained presbyters (leaders of Christian communities), the Consecrated (Religious) and the lay faithful, transcend their self-love and pour out their lives in humility to promote a better quality of Christian life for the poor, the oppressed and also for Mother Earth which has become our new neighbour, wounded and in travail due to the greediness of people slavishly bent on profit-making unconditionally..

Such a spiritual experience will also readily help to resist (individually and collectively) the compulsion to undertake programmes and projects which do not reveal the Eucharistic spirituality and run counter to its deep meaning.

St. John Chrysostom (A.D 349-407) who had prayerfully reflected on the contextual situation that prevailed during his time had said, *'He who said, 'This is my body' is the One who also said, 'You saw me hungry and you gave me no food...' what good is it if the Eucharistic Table groans under the weight of the golden chalices, when Christ is dying of hunger. Start by satisfying his hunger and then with what remains you may adorn the altar as well!'*

Pope John Paul 11 in his encyclical on Social Concern,) noted: *"Faced with cases of need, one cannot ignore them in favour of superfluous church ornaments and costly furnishings for divine worship; on the contrary it could be obligatory to sell these goods in order to provide food, drink, clothing and shelter for those who lack these things."*¹

¹ John Paul 11, *Sollicitudo Socialis*, Vatican City, no 31

7.

EUCCHARISTIC LIVING IN TODAY'S WORLD

- A) To the person(s) who came crying, “**Dom Helder**, a thief has broken into one of our churches and opened the tabernacle. The thief threw away the hosts and threw them into the mud.... Now we must have a great ceremony of atonement”, Helder Camera, Bishop of Recife, Brazil, had told, ‘We are shocked because our brother, the thief threw the Eucharistic Christ into the mud. But here in North East, Brazil, Christ lives in mud all the time. We must open our eyes to recognize the Eucharist of the poor, the oppressed, the suffering’.”
- B) When **Abbe Pierre**, the worker priest in France, in the post-war years in France, began to collect war-orphan children who were scavenging for food and worked with them, he became a nuisance to all, as he began to prick the conscience of those who allowed such things to happen.

One winter, he huddled hundreds of these little children into the church for accommodation after removing the Blessed Sacrament into the attic of the church. His brother-priests severely criticised him for being irreverent towards the Blessed Sacrament. His reply was, ‘Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament does not feel the biting cold of winter, but Jesus, in these children, does’.”

- **Aloysius Pieris SJ** in a homily to Catholic doctors on April 4, 1996, Cfr. *The Missionary Oblate*, no 13 p 25.

C) “While attending a meeting one time in Bologna, Italy, a few participants went downtown on a Sunday morning, heading for a church where they had been told the celebration of the Eucharist was ‘interesting’. On arrival they found the interior of the church filled with the poor and the homeless, with some parishioners laying out tables of food the whole day down the nave. They inquired of a woman, “who seemed to be somebody” (as St. Paul said of the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem) whether there was to be a Mass, to which she replied that there would be after all these people had been fed. Then she added, “How can we feed from the body of Christ unless we have fed the body of Christ.” She was but echoing the understanding of the early Christian times that the Eucharistic gathering was the time and place for taking care of the poor of the community.”

- **David Power OMI**, *Worship*, Sept. 2009, p 387.

8.

GOD'S GIFT OF FORGIVENESS

Unconditionally forgiving love is one of the aspects of Jesus' spirituality. Jesus' experience of a merciful and compassionate God (Abba) made him reveal both by word and deed, to the surprise of his audience, the transforming power of God's forgiving love, within the context of the unconditional love of God (Mk 2:5-7; Mt 9:2; Lk 5:20).

Jesus preached forgiveness

In his preaching, Jesus proclaimed God as a compassionate and forgiving Abba (Lk 15). This was and is good news to great sinners living in fear and with guilt feelings. The three stories in Lk 15 reveal the true image of God that Jesus came to reveal, a God whose basis for dealing with us is God's unbelievable compassionate love and tenderness. The three stories portray a God as lover, as one who is generous to a fault in his compassion and goodness. The Father revealed by Jesus is one who runs down the road, embraces the son and says, "You are home. It's all I wanted. Wherever I am I want you with me; wherever you are, I want to be with you. Even if a mother forgets the child of her womb, I will not forget you." Homecoming therefore takes a surprising turn; Father does not reject and disown his son as the son himself had expected (Lk 15: 19). Father does not demand amends for his wrong doings; no restitution for financial loss to the father; no punishment at all; no scolding, no apology. Instead the father puts on the son a robe which is a sign of acceptance; he puts

on a ring on the son's finger which is a sign of giving authority; he gives sandals for the feet which is a sign of freedom and prestige. Father rejoices at the return of the son and celebrates the prodigal son's return.

Message for our life from Lk 15.

1. Abba's forgiving love is unconditional; 2. Abba is not bothered about our sins but awaits our return to his loving embrace; 3. Abba does not remember our sins but celebrates our return joyfully; 4. Abba is neither a vindictive God nor a punishing God; 5. Abba's motherly forgiving love is healing love which restores spiritual health.

Though condemned as a criminal, Aloysius Pieris S.J.¹ says Jesus conducted himself as a Merciful Judge who would not criminalise His enemies even though they charged him with two crimes that called for capital punishment.: (1) blasphemously claiming identity with God (Jn 19:7); (2) claiming to be the King of the Jews (19:21), which was a capital crime in Rome. On the Cross during his agony, Jesus proclaims loudly that God is our unconditional forgiver (Lk 23:34), and pleads on behalf of the evil doers. Jesus looked at his crucifixion from the perspective of the offender and pleaded on behalf of the evil doers because those who were sent to kill him did not know He was the Messiah. So Jesus, the crucified, invoked ignorance and hence they were free from blame.

¹ Aloysius Pieris, SJ, *Lent in Lanka, Reflections and Resolutions*, Tulana Jubilee Publications, Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, 2017, p 28

They were unfree because they were under the influence of the Pharisees who were pressurized by Roman authorities who considered Jesus as a trouble maker subverting the country (Jn 11:49-52).

God's forgiving actions through Jesus Christ

Jesus, during His public ministry, not only preached about forgiveness of sins of people but He also forgave sinners. For example, Matthew / Levi was accepted the moment he responded and the association was sealed with a shared meal. In the parable of two debtors (Lk 7: 36-50), Jesus shows that the great love the woman has shown him proves that her sins have been forgiven (v 43, 46-47). The woman's love is the result of the forgiveness received that had given her the strength to love in such a way. Zacchaeus repented and amended his life only after Jesus showed that he loved him enough to sit with him at the same table (Lk 19).

Jesus wants us to hear his voice of unconditional love. It is the voice that calls us always to return to the one who has loved us so much and wants to recreate us in his compassion and mercy. Matthew, Zacchaeus and Samaritan woman returned after hearing the voice of Jesus. Peter heard that voice of the risen Lord Jesus and returned. Paul heard that voice of compassion of Jesus, repented and returned to Jesus. We may refuse God's love but we will never lose God's love because God's love is covenantal love, a love that is never withdrawn, a love that forgets people's violations of covenantal promises.

At times, God may display just anger through compassionate confessors, spiritual directors, accompaniers, parish priests

and good friends in order to correct us when we do wrong. Such anger is not hatred. It is correctional love.

Jesus had corrected Peter and the other eleven but never made them feel guilty by referring to their past betrayals. The process of reconciliation of Peter and the other eleven was not one of “their repentance eliciting Jesus’ forgiveness but Jesus’ forgiveness evoking their repentance. Love imposes no conditions. According to Soares Prabhu, S.J, repentance is wholehearted trusting acceptance of God’s unconditional love.

Aloysius Pieris, SJ ² says, “In fact the appearance of the Risen Lord to his disciples was a confirmation of his verdict of “not guilty” passed from the Tribunal of Mercy on Golgotha. Neither Peter nor the other ‘brethren’ of Jesus felt any remorse when he appeared to them. There was joy, and only joy. For he never made them feel guilty by referring to their past betrayals. Instead, he entrusted them with the task of continuing his mission, promising his Spirit’s abiding power and guidance.”²

God and Jesus never stop showing mercy and forgiveness. *“The message of Jesus is mercy. For me and I say this in humility; it is the Lord’s strongest message”* (Pope Francis). *“God never tires of forgiving us. We are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy”* (Pope Francis, E.G no3). *“Mercy is something difficult to understand; it does not erase sins. What erases sin is God’s forgiveness. Forgiveness is the essence of love which can understand mistakes and mend them. Jesus*

² Ibid. pp 28-32

sought to reveal by his entire life.” (Pope Francis). God / Forgiveness is the most visible sign of Father’s love which Jesus sought to reveal by his entire life.” (Pope Francis). Forgiveness of God heals and creates newness of life. God / Jesus does not remember our sins.

Forgiveness and Repentance

It is wrong to think that it is our repentance which is the “condition required” to draw God’s forgiveness. For divine forgiveness by definition, is an unconditional and gratuitous love. Awareness of God’s forgiving love makes us repent and return to God’s embrace joyfully. When the ‘prodigal’ son came to his senses, he decided to leave his ‘sinful’ situation (Lk 15:17-18). This is the message Jesus has tried to give us.

Today, for some people (like Judas) despair seems attractive, seeing everything in the negative. For those who, like Peter, returning to Jesus in hope, Jesus opens their ears to another voice, “I am your God. I love you. Don’t run away from me. I am your God of mercy and compassion. Do not condemn yourself. Do not reject yourself.” Jesus’ voice asks for an open relationship, one in which sins are acknowledged, forgiveness received and love renewed. Jesus does not offer us solutions but intimacy / friendship.

Enemy love and Reconciliation

Jesus has taught that Abba’s forgiving love includes enemy love (Mt 5:43-48). To love and to forgive are the two loving requests of Jesus dying on the Cross. Jesus, who wanted His disciples to love one another as He has loved them, also preached publicly, ‘You have heard how it was said; you

will love your neighbour and hate your enemy. I say this to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of your Father in heaven'. (Mt 5: 43-45). Matthean Jesus' call to be perfect as your Father in heaven is a call to be perfect in forgiving love ('love your enemies') like Lucan Jesus' call to be compassionate as your Father in heaven."

Jesus' call for unlimited reconciliation, coupled with his boundless compassion / mercy, is another aspect of Jesus' spirituality. "Be merciful as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36). God makes the sun to shine and the rain to pour on the evil and the good, the just and the unjust. Therefore God's way becomes the pattern for human responses so that we may be children of God.

How is God's forgiveness related to human forgiveness?

John Fuellenbach says, "Almost all scholars agree that the phrase "as we forgive" should not be taken as a comparison, as if God would forgive us in the measure that we forgive. The parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Mt 18:23-35) suggests quite clearly that God's forgiveness precedes human forgiveness. God first forgives and expects us to forgive one another. The parable implies that human forgiveness is a consequence of God's prior action. We have no excuse for being unforgiving. We can and must forgive one another because we have first been forgiven. ...The parable indicates that God's forgiveness becomes real for us when we accept this forgiving love as happening to us. ...Our forgiveness of one another, therefore, becomes the sign of how far we have

accepted God's great gift of forgiveness that is offered to us now."³

Though Mt 6: 14-15 seems to be totally inconsistent with the parable of the Unmerciful Servant, John Fuellenbach ⁴ says that it can be reconciled if we keep in mind that God's forgiveness always precedes human forgiveness and that human forgiveness is a consequence of God's forgiveness. God's forgiveness can become real for us only when we are willing to forgive one another. Mt 6:14-15 says that God's forgiveness can become real for us only if we receive it graciously and let it change our life. Then we can really forgive others in the power of the forgiving love of God that is here and now present in us. To be able to forgive is not a purely human capacity, since human beings have a tendency to desire revenge. Being forgiving towards others is a gift of God and a true sign that a person has let the power of the Kingdom present into his / her life.

Joachim Jeremias⁵, the Bible scholar translates Luke's words back into Aramaic: "As we also herewith forgive our debtors." The meaning then is: "We are ready to pass on to others the forgiveness which we have received. Grant us, dear Father, the gift of the age of salvation, thy forgiveness, so that, in the strength of received forgiveness we might forgive those those who have wronged us. How God's forgiveness precedes our ability to forgive and to love is most clearly expressed in Luke's parable of the Great Sinner (Lk7:36-50).The woman's love for Jesus is the result of the

³John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 10545. p 290; ⁴ *ibid*, p 291; ⁵Joachim Jeremias, *The Lord's Prayer*, London: SCM Press, 1977, pp 27-28)

forgiveness received that has given her the strength to love in such a way.

Conversion

Temptation is not sin. Sin is giving into appetites and desires without using one's freedom to choose what is good. Sin therefore is abuse of freedom which is a gift of God. Sin is lovelessness in a person. So it is Godlessness since God is Love. Hence our prayer is, "Lord. Deliver us from lovelessness."

Self-rejection, Self-negation, self-torture and self-condemnation are greatest enemies of spiritual life because they contradict the sacred voice of God that calls us, "the beloved". In St. Peter we see a profound difference of self-perception. Though he denied Jesus, he returned to Jesus in a flood of loving tears which were his manifestation of his repentance as well.

St. Peter did not stay away from Jesus in despair, but returned in hope. Sometimes despair seems an attractive choice solving everything in the negative. The voice of despair says, 'I sin over and over again. After endless promises to do better next time, I find myself back again in the old dark situation.'

But Jesus is our compassionate and merciful Saviour who died and rose for us and for our salvation. So He loves us with a love that has no limits because He loves us as He Himself is loved by His Maternal Father (Abba). Jesus invites us not once but always because He is our merciful Saviour.

God who gives birth to us by maternal tenderness cannot disown us in our weakness and wickedness and Jesus suffers more than we do when we distance ourselves from his affectionate embrace.

TO PONDER: Some OT & N.T Biblical Texts

Isaiah 49: 15 - 16 ; 54: 4-10; Ezechiel 33:11;
Hosea 2: 19 – 20; Joel 2: 12 – 12; Micah 7:18 – 19 ;
Jn 8: 10; Lk 7: 36 – 50; 15:11 – 32 ; Col 3: 12- 13

9.

FORGIVENESS ENHANCES LIFE

Hatred and revenge diminish the human being

For Jesus, the reign of God is promise of love, compassion and forgiveness; and not of revenge and chastisement. God's love is a covenanted love, not a contractual love. It is never cancelled. It is not earned or won by the person to whom it is given. It is always a free gift. It goes far beyond the demands of justice and reciprocity. It is never taken back or withdrawn. It is forever, (Is 49:15-16; Heb 13:5). We can refuse the love of God but we can never lose the love of God. (Lk 15).

“You have heard that they were told: ‘an eye for an eye ...but I say to you: Do not resist those who wrong you.... You have heard how it was said: you must love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say this to you. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:38 - 48). Jesus was aware of the destructive power of revenge and hatred, the power that destroys not only others and the environment but also oneself, the one who hates.

In the person consumed by revenge, something is already dead namely love. Love cannot coexist with revenge. Graciousness and revenge won't go together. In fact love is destroyed by revenge. If love without justice can give rise to greater injustice, justice without love can turn the human heart into a hard stone and deprive it of human feelings. There can be love with justice and justice with love. This is the way of God's reign. It is the way of the cross says C.S. Song¹

Revenge and hatred consume much energy. Why allow Ourselves to be consumed and be diminished by such

¹ C.S.Song, *Jesus and the reign of God*, p 176

negative troublesome feelings? Why allow ourselves to be controlled by revenge and hatred? When we allow these feelings to have power over us, we become less human because we abdicate our freedom and become a slave of such feelings. Revenge and hatred can cause also psych-somatic diseases such as ulcers, heart ailments, and headache. diabetes etc. These negative feelings can also create a discomfort, a mental uneasiness, dis-ease within us.

In the life of Jesus we see him allowing others to hurt him. For example, people called him a drunkard, a friend of outcasts and prostitutes. In other words, wherever he went and with whomsoever he associated, Jesus was a person who created an atmosphere/environment for others to articulate their feelings. He was open, transparent and even vulnerable. He was not afraid of the truth. As Christians, as presbyters and Consecrated Religious, do we create by our life-style an atmosphere in our Christian families, parishes and religious communities for others to be themselves by freely expressing their feelings and ideas? Often we insist that others should hear us, listen to us, accept our views etc while denying the same freedom and that right to others. In this way we become oppressors, despots, 'pharaohs' who harass, enslaves and intimidate others.

Quite often, instead of trying to see the truth in what others say about us, we misjudge others and also feel hurt. Instead of finding out the truth, often we try to find out the person who said such a thing to hurt us. In other words, we are already prejudiced and not open to the truth. Whereas if we are thankful to others for pointing out to us the truth (the mistake, the wrong, the evil) in our lives, then we become more human and others will feel at ease with ourselves. In this way we humanize and christianize the environment wherein we live and work. For such values to emerge in our lives, we should

first and foremost accept gently and own the truth which others say about us, express it assertively, telling the truth with love (non-violently).

Jesus, the liberator

Jesus came to set people free (Jn 12:48) and not to condemn. His love was unconditional and opens to all. Such a person became a threat to those who held power of one kind or another. They were not willing to let go their power and leave themselves vulnerable. They did not allow Jesus to teach the ordinary people his way of coping with primal fear (by entrusting themselves in openness and vulnerability to others). They made Jesus pay the price of holding nothing back, for witnessing to the truth that sets people free from tyranny and fear (Jn 8:32).

Jesus, the forgiver

“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk23:34). Surely Jesus had reasons to utter these sacred words. Jesus knew that they did not know fully what they were doing. They did not know that Jesus was the messiah and the saviour. They were under the influence of the leaders who interpreted their scriptures and their sacred laws in a wrong way. They were pressurized by the Roman authorities who considered Jesus as a trouble maker and one who was subverting the nation.(Jn 11:49-50). Jesus perceived His crucifixion from the perspective of the offender. Jesus forgave easily because He knew the human stuff: that people are victims of ignorance and of unfreedom. So Jesus forgave sinners (Jn8:14); forgave his tormentors (Lk7:37; 23:34); He mixed with sinners with compassion (Mt 9:10; Lk15:2; 19:7). He taught unconditional forgiveness as His mission (Mt 8:13; Lk 15: 32).

Both Saints Peter and Paul reaffirmed the ignorance of the Jews (Acts 3:17 ff ; 1Tim 1:13). St. Paul referred to the absence of freedom (Rom7:15-20).

Can we find in Jesus' life anything that would help to account for such an almost superhuman pattern of behaviour? His baptism had a profound effect; it gave Jesus a deep security at the core of His being. It gave him a clear sense of being called and an equal sense of the purpose of his calling. He was the embodiment of God's compassion for all His creatures. In Him we see Father's love and compassion, the Spirit of forgiveness.

“What god can compare with you, taking fault away,
pardonning crime,
not cherishing anger for ever
but delighting in showing mercy?
Once more have pity on us,
tread down our faults,
to the bottom of the sea
throw all our sins” (Micah 7:18-19).

“The Lord, a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity”.(Exod 34:6).

Forgiveness is difficult if we have been brought up in an atmosphere of harshness and resentment. However, Jesus Christ has also given us the power to forgive others and ourselves.(Jn 20:19-23; Col 3:12-15; Col 3:12-15). It is our Christian responsibility to activate that power/energy within us and not to make it remain dormant. We are also called to be ministers of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:17-21),

Forgiveness heals

Forgiveness is a very effective medicine. It heals the wounds

caused by revenge and hatred and brings back physical and psychological health, the lost energy, inner tranquility and joy which are fruits of the Kingdom of God. It makes people relax and be bonded together again. It creates a comfortable atmosphere and a new connectedness among persons. Forgiveness paves the way for the emergence of a human and a Christian community. Ability to forgive is a sure sign of the growth in Christian life and spirit. Hence as a Christian, I need to forgive anyone who has wronged me and hurt me.

Forgiving is not forgetting

To forgive is not to forget. Revenge is a sin that causes a wound (hurt feelings, regrets) and it pains. Each time we remember the person who hurt us, we will experience severe negative feelings and emotions. Our memory retains the hurts. Just as medicine cures the wound, removes the pain and leaves behind only a mere scar, forgiveness heals the wound caused by revenge and hatred and removes the pain within us. Just as the scar will remain for some time without causing pain in our body after the wound is healed, we will continue perhaps to remember the hurts and the regrets for some time and our memory will not cause any pain within us because forgiveness had healed our memory which had kept remembering the wrong done to us. Just as scarred people are loving, lovable and beautiful, the people who forgive others also become loving, lovable and beautiful.

Ignorance , not a license to commit evil

To know that we sin out of ignorance and lack of freedom and hence not really guilty is not a license for us to commit sin. Whether we are subjectively guilty or not, every sin destroys us, others and the environment. If we drink poison thinking it is health tonic, it is no guarantee against poisoning. So it is with sin. Sin diminishes the human being. Therefore we have a duty to grow in awareness and freedom through silence,

prayer, feed-back from people and other means. It is also our responsibility to make others grow in awareness and freedom.²

Forgiveness and justice

Does forgiveness exempt us from working for justice? Jesus, our Saviour and leader does not forbid us to resist unjust attack in due measure (Jn18:22) and to eliminate injustice from the world. For example, the Third World countries forgive the slavery of colonization but they demand justice, redemption from debts from the colonizers.

“Forgiveness is the covenant-obligation to cancel debts in the way God lovingly ignores indebtedness to Her (God) The Jubilee year was a massive social enactment of this form of justice. The ‘indebted’ are the poor whom God has chosen as partners in His mission. To make anyone indebted to myself is to bind and to enslave that person: it is a sin against the covenant. God’s mission embodies a morality which requires cancellation of debts without which there is no justice to the poor. Forgiveness is the highest expression of it.”³ Our Christian Scriptures invite us to cancel all debts except the debt of love.

² C.P.Varkey: *Be human be holy*, p 66;

³ Aloysius Peiris, SJ, *God’s reign for God’s poor*, Tulana Jubilee Publications, Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, 1999, p 22).

10.

FORGIVENESS, HEALING & PEACE

1. Resentment and revenge take away our energy (psychic, physical and spiritual). Why should we allow ourselves to be consumed by this evil power and be wasted away?

2. Physical and psychological health also depends on forgiveness. A “dis-ease” in the mind affects the body. When the mind is disturbed with too much of resentment and revenge, the defense system is weakened. Some medicines only help relieve the symptoms which then makes it easier for the healing power of the body to work more effectively. But the defense system and the healing power of the body are blocked partially or totally when the mind is not at ease. Resentment and revenge are perhaps killer diseases, causing at times serious sicknesses. We need to forgive anyone who has wronged us and hurt us. Forgiveness is a very effective medicine and therapy.

3. The wound of sin a new concept in catholic consciousness. Now through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we obtain pardon for sins and healing for the wounds relationships and self-esteem caused by sins. Peace is the result of the pardon for sins as well as the healing of the wounds caused by sins.

4. Forgiving is not forgetting. When I hurt someone, the hurtful memory does not need to be forgotten. In fact, such a memory cannot be forgotten. When the memories of hurtful events are healed, the wounds inflicted by the hurts are healed but the scars (remembering) remain. The scars don't cause pain. Scarred people are also beautiful. Similarly, when I forgive, the wounds in me are healed and even if I remember the hurts, they do not any more cause pain as before they were healed....they were wounds causing pain. A saintly nun told

the bishop that she was having visions of Jesus. To test her, the bishop said: “Next time you see Jesus, ask him what was the bishop’s great sin before he became a bishop. Months later when he asked her what Jesus said, she replied, “Jesus said he no longer remembers it.” Jesus does not remember any hurt that has been forgiven by him or by us.

5. Let us begin by forgiving ourselves. God forgives us unconditionally. He does not ask questions regarding our sins, He is not interested in the details. No. He is only awaiting our return, ready to embrace us. To Peter, Jesus asked, “Do you love me”. No questions were asked regarding his denial etc.

6. Learning to forgive oneself helps to forgive others. How often we ask pardon from God/Jesus Christ and obtain forgiveness and peace and joy. In asking for forgiveness, we acknowledge our sins, failures, weakness etc. Why shouldn’t we forgive others when they hurt us?

11.

EXAMEN OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Alber Nolan, OP : *“I don’t put the emphasis on sin and guilt because Jesus didn’t do that. I’m not talking about the traditional examination of conscience, of what sins have I committed. That kind of discovery leads to guilt. Then you begin to reject part of yourself. When you’re simply trying to get to know yourself without imputing guilt, you begin to see what’s actually happening. You see there are things that perhaps you aren’t proud of, that your motives are selfish, recognizing that part of who and what you are. Jesus did not go around blaming people. So we mustn’t blame ourselves all the time. We must rather just see what’s there, because that will lead to action.”*

- Albert Nolan, OP, NCR July 20,2007.

12.

HOW TO CONFESS Penitential Dialogue

Cardinal Martini, SJ explains this subject through this lengthy citation.

“It is not my intention here to present a pastoral study, but simply to offer a suggestion to those who, perhaps have found themselves making their confession less and less frequently, without quite being able to establish why: and who find themselves incapable of resuming a practice, by now formalized, because of a certain inner unease. I want to offer this suggestion only because it has been helpful to me. We all

propose what we have experienced to be positive. I asked myself or, rather, the Lord inspired me to ask when I found it difficult to make a short and hasty confession. Why not try to make it at great length and with greater calm?

This appears paradoxical; but sometimes even paradoxes may help to get us out of a corner. So, with another's help, I moved from confession to what I would call a penitential dialogue...It seems to me that it is, above all., a dialogue with a brother who represents the Church: a priest, therefore, in whom I recognize God's immediate representative; a dialogue carried out in prayer together, during which I put forward what I feel within me, at this moment; I present myself as I am, before the Church and before God, recognizing what brings joy to my mind.

This dialogue includes two essential parts: the first one which I call "confession laudis", that is confession according to the original sense of the word. Here again, we start off with a paradox: if it is so difficult and uncomfortable each time to say my sins, why not begin with good deeds? St. Ignatius himself recommends it in the Exercises, taking thanksgiving as the first point: Lord, I want, first of all, to thank you for helping me, because such and such a thing has happened, because I have been able to establish contact with such a one, because I feel myself to be more at peace, I have got over a difficult moment, I can pray better. Thanking God for what I am, for his gift, in the form of a dialogue, a prayer, giving praise; recognizing before God what, at this time, gives me joy; I am happy with such and such a thing, whether past or present. It is important that these things come out before the

Lord: recognition of his goodness towards us of his power, of his mercy.

Having done this, recognizing what makes me ill at ease, you can move on to a “**confessio vitae**” which I would define as follows: rather than a seeking and enumerating of formal sins, it is saying before God that which now makes me ill at ease, whatever I would like to do away with my life. Frequently, they are more attitudes or ways of being, rather than formal sins; but in the final analysis, the causes are the twelve attitudes listed by St. Mark: pride, envy, cupidity that come out in these states of soul. Or rather I will say before God: I regret not being able to speak sincerely with such a person, my relationship with such a group is not authentic. I do not know where to begin. I regret not being able to pray. I feel ill at ease in the grip of my sensuality, of those desires that I would rather be without, these images that haunt me. I may not have any particular sin to confess, but I place myself before the Lord and ask him to heal me. It is not a matter of placing three or four sins on the table so that they may be wiped out, but rather of a baptismal immersion in the power of the Spirit: Lord, purify me, guide me, enlighten me, I do not only ask, in this confession, that such and such a sin be obliterated, but that my heart be changed, that there be less heaviness in me, less sadness, less skepticism, less pride. Perhaps I do not know where to begin, but I put all of this in the power of the crucified and risen One by the power of the Church. Out of this emerges a prayer that you can make together with the priest: you may like to recite a psalm, a thanksgiving or petitionary prayer from the Bible, or even a spontaneous prayer, upon which the sacramental absolution

comes down like a showing forth of God's power that I am seeking, precisely because I am incapable of making progress all on my own. I place myself once more at the foot of the cross, under that power that baptized me, so that it may, once again, take me in hand.

Here is what I mean by a penitential dialogue: it is not just a psychological dialogue, or a kind of therapy. It is not necessary for the confessor to reveal to me the secret sources of my faults: that can be done equally with a specialist of the human heart, but even if the confessor does not know much about the human heart, he can still pray for me, over me, with me. It is a matter of submitting myself to the power of the Church and thereby rediscovering the value of the sacrament. I am going to make confession not in order to experience something interesting, nor to see what advice I will be given, but because I am the one who needs to submit himself / herself to the power of God; and that is enough for me, bringing me joy and peace. This, then, is the suggestion that I wanted to make to you – with its many possible variations. It is obvious that a confession, made in this way, can last a long time; but we face it the more willingly because we can see what it means in terms of our journey towards God. To each one of us, the Lord will probably have suggested other forms, forms that can also be usefully communicated as experience, because they will be of help to others.”

- **Carlo Maria Cardinal Martini SJ**, Archbishop of Milan. He died of Parkinson's disease, 31st August, 2012.

13.

JESUS' MISSION OF LOVE HASTENED HIS DEATH ON THE CROSS

Prayerfully reading and reflecting on the Word of God revealed in the Books of the Old Testament, leads us to know God as a lover of the people. God cared for the people through the Patriarchs and the Prophets. But in the New Testament, we are told that God loved the world very much that He sent Jesus, His only Son, to manifest God's love in tangible and visible way (Jn 3: 16-17) and that through his love, to save the world (people) and nurture the flourishing of life of people. (Jn 10:10)

In his human nature, Jesus had a historic experience and awareness of God as a very loving, compassionate and merciful maternal Father (Abba) who is responsive to human pain and need. That historic experience also made Jesus to say, "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete his work" (Jn 4:34; 5:30). The will of Abba (Aramaic word for father) was that he (Jesus) communicates Abba's love by word and deed to people.

Towards the end of his life, Jesus was able to tell his followers, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Remain in my love....Love one another as I have loved you. A person can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his/her friends" (Jn 15:9, 12). "By this love that you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples" (Jn 13: 35).

Compassionate love of Jesus

Having experienced Abba's love, compassion and mercy, Jesus began to respond to people's pains and needs, by his words and by his actions. His compassionate actions, born of his God-experience spoke louder. For example, Jesus began mixing with the people of Jewish society who were excluded and marginalized by the society and the organized religion. He consoled and comforted them in many ways since they were excluded from participating in the social activities and in the worship, because of an interpretation of the sacred text in Leviticus 19: 2.

The Pharisees and the High Priests interpreted the passage, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" in the book of Leviticus 19:2 to mean, "You (Israel) shall be pure as God is pure." Holiness was understood by them to mean "separation from everything unclean." Such an understanding of the Word of God created a social system in the Jewish society based on purity / cleanliness in which several categories of people were considered unclean and therefore excluded from participating in the sacred worship and in the social activities.¹

Jesus, by his teaching, preaching and action, subverted the purity system and replaced it with an alternative social vision based on compassion. He proclaimed, "Be compassionate as God is compassionate" (Lk 6:36). Where purity divided and -

¹ Marcus J. Bord, *Meeting Jesus again for the First Time*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY 10022, p 50

excluded people, compassion united and included. Jesus' compassionate and merciful actions brought soothing feelings of human dignity, esteem and social equality to the excluded and the marginalized.

Jesus' actions spoke louder

Jesus provocatively associated with the people who were considered unclean or impure, e.g. the sinners, the sick, the lepers, the poor, the tax collectors, the Samaritans. To a woman who was caught in a situation of adultery, Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." From a situation of oppression and victimhood, she was rescued to regain her lost personhood (Jn 8:11). To another woman, with a bad name, who went to the place where Jesus was invited to a meal by the Pharisees, and who fell at the feet of Jesus weeping and kissing his feet, anointing with very costly ointment and wiping with her hair, Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven... go in peace" (Lk 7: 36-38, 47,50). Forgiveness is a highest form of compassionate love and mercy of God manifested by Jesus. The Pharisees were shocked and then blamed Jesus for forgiving the sinners because they said that Jesus was claiming to himself the quality of God to himself.

Sinners and tax collectors, who were counted as worthless human beings by the society and the organized religion, felt valued and esteemed as dignified persons by Jesus, whenever Jesus invited them to sit with him and share a meal.

The Pharisees blamed Jesus for eating with the tax collectors and sinners saying, Jesus was breaking their traditions which they interpreted as God's laws (cf Lk 15: 3; Mt 9:11). Jesus

had no regrets for being a friend of such peripheral people. He made it known to them that this was precisely what he wanted things to be.

Jesus fed the hungry

Jesus was a lover of the poor and he did not send the hungry away. He fed the hungry with good things (Mk 6:34-44). He fed the hungry even on the Sabbath day when he realized that the hungry would collapse on the way (Mt 15:32). The Pharisees said that Jesus was breaking the Sabbath which for them was a holy day.

Jesus cured the sick and the infirm

Jesus cured the lame, the crippled, the blind, the dumb and many others (Mt 5:30). When a leper came to him and pleaded on his knees, Jesus showed his love by stretching out his hand and touching him and curing him (Mk 1: 40-41). Jesus' compassion was boundary-breaking because He was born to bring together the scattered children of God (Jn 11:52). He drew his strength to reach out to people at the bottom of the social and cultural pyramid from his intimacy rooted in his Abba experience, which generated new enthusiasm, new spiritual energy and motivation to save and nurture people's innate human dignity, personal esteem, equality, community spirit and flourishing of life (Acts 10: 34-38; Jn 10: 10).

Doing good hastened the death of Jesus

Jesus' inner freedom regarding the interpretation of the Law, his stand vis-a-vis the temple and doing good, namely

rescuing the victims of oppression and exploitation, forgiving sinners, feeding the hungry on the Sabbath, gathering the excluded and the marginalized and eating with them, were seen by the oppressors and the victimisers as upsetting and subverting the nation and a threat to the Jewish officialdom (Lk 23:5). Such actions of love of Jesus invited rejection, suffering, torture and his death. “Even though they found no charge against him which deserved death, they begged Pilate to have him executed” (Acts 13: 28) So they got rid of Jesus of Nazareth by crucifying him on the cross at the hands of the Romans with the consent of the Jewish religious authorities. Jesus’ death was the result of his mission of love for God and love for people (Jn 15:13).

Aloysius Pieris, SJ says “The purpose of Jesus’ coming was not to suffer and die, but to teach us how to love and thus be redeemed. The consequence of that mission was the bitter opposition that he faced and endured to the point of death which was the awful cost of that love” (*Daily Mirror*, March 25, 2016).

Edward Schillebeeckx, ¹ said, “Jesus was executed, evidently because he had spoken of a God who was concerned for humanity and who therefore required people to be concerned for their fellow men and women. The Bible calls this ‘the Kingdom of God’, the loving God, who has mercy on the humble and the outcast, people who have been shamefully treated.”

¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ, The Christain experience in the Modern World*, p 840, SCM Press Ltd, 48 Bloombury St. London 1980, p 840

God vindicated Jesus

God, the compassionate and merciful One, who loved human beings so much that He sent Jesus to be with the human beings in order to rescue them from sin and suffering and create a community of mutual love, was much pleased with the way Jesus manifested God's love for people. Therefore God made Jesus rise from the dead, thereby showing Jesus was blameless. Thus Resurrection (Rising from the dead) of Jesus is rightly interpreted as the vindication of Jesus in the Sacred Scriptures: "God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you have crucified" (cf Acts 2:36).

TO PONDER

- Jesus was crucified as a result of his mission of love which became a threat to the Jewish officialdom. His inner freedom regarding the interpretation of the law and presenting himself as God's new temple led him to torture and death.
- Jesus drew his strength to reach out to people at the bottom of the social and cultural pyramid, from his Abba experience, which generated new enthusiasm, new spiritual energy and motivation to save and nurture people's innate human dignity, personal esteem, equality, community spirit and flourishing of life.
- Jesus' love for people was and is saving love.

- Do people see in us, the Consecrated persons and ordained ministers, the reflection of the saving love of Jesus Christ?
- Does my Christian worship make me to perform deeds of loving service to people in need and pain?
- What is the quality of my / our worship and service to people in need and pain in the parishes and in our Religious communities, Houses and Institutions?
- What is the quality of my compassionate love as a Consecrated person in the diocese / in the Church?
- Do I appear as a compassionate and joyful person or as a self-centered or perhaps a depressed person?

14.

MARY, THE MISSIONARY MOTHER OF JESUS

Mary is Blessed

In the history of salvation, Mary has a special place since she was chosen by God to become the missionary mother of Jesus, the Messiah, the Word-Incarnate and the Saviour.. She was blessed – full of grace – by God and held in great esteem by ordinary people as well. One day when Jesus was speaking to the people, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and cried out, “Happy the womb that bore you and the breast you sucked” (Lk 11:27). When Mary went to see Elizabeth, her relative, she was greeted with these words: “Of all women you are most blessed” and “Blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled” (Lk 1:42,45). And filled with the Spirit, Mary herself exclaimed, “All generations will call me blessed” (Lk 1:48).

Eve used her freedom selfishly giving way to her appetites. Mary used her freedom to obey God’s will. Doing the will of God shows the good disposition of her heart. Therefore she could also say, “My soul proclaims the greatness of my God”.

Pope Pius IX in 1854 solemnly proclaimed in his decree **“Ineffabilis Deus”** the immaculate conception of Mary as an article of faith of the Catholics. It means that ‘from the first moment of her conception in the womb of her mother, Mary, by the special choice of God, was preserved from the existing

situation of sin to which all other human beings are subject.’

At her apparition at Lourdes in 1858 Mary, the mother of Jesus, declared herself to be the “Immaculate Conception”. The feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary has been kept since the 7th century in the Eastern Church and in the Western since the 9th century.

Even before the Church declared her ‘Immaculate’ and ‘Mother of the Church’, God’s Spirit greeted her “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you.” The words, “Mary full of grace” has also been understood as freed from all stain of sin.

The sin committed by Adam and Eve, our first parents, has been understood in the Church as a sin that is being transmitted to every human being from the moment of birth. Can we think of an infant that is newly born to be in a state of sin? What is actually transmitted is a defect or a weakness, and not an actual sin. Mary was preserved from that kind of weakness as well. That is why the angel was able to greet Mary declaring her, “full of grace”. She is a sinless human person. She was preserved from every proneness to sin in view of her becoming the mother of Jesus, our Saviour.

She has been accompanying Jesus from her womb to His tomb and beyond. She was present with the Apostles of Jesus at the dawn of the Church in the world when she, with the Apostles, received the Holy Spirit sent by the Risen Jesus from Abba, His beloved Father at the dramatic event of

Pentecost. The Second Vatican Council declared Mary, the mother of Jesus, also to be the mother of the Church.

Since Mary had been the biological mother and also a disciple of Jesus. Scripture tells us that she listened to Jesus and conducted herself according to the Word of God. She is a ponderer of the Word of God (Lk 2: 19, 52 treasuring the Word of God in her heart. She received inspiration and spiritual energy from the Word of God. She kept the Word of God, tasted God's messages and was nourished by it. By such a way of life she could exclaim, "My spirit proclaims the glory of God. My spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour."

We too need to learn from her how to read the Word of God, listen to the Spirit who explains the Word of God to us, and live according to the message we receive. We can pray to her saying, "Inspire me with the same sentiments that were yours while pondering the revealed mysteries which you treasured in your heart."

Mary lived by the Word of God

As post-Easter people, we need to learn how to be missionary disciples of Jesus in today's world. She was one who had placed her trust in God's providential care and responded to the unforeseen situations, for example giving birth to Jesus in a manger and becoming also a migrant to escape the wrath of Herod who had planned to kill the new-born child.

During the public life of Jesus, Mary was with Jesus with unshakable trust in God. Her trust in the trustworthy God was also visible, especially when Jesus was rejected and

condemned to death on the cross. She made no complaints to God but accepted the pain as a good mother. Through her devout life, Mary shared with Jesus His missionary work of our salvation. God, the reliable One, blessed her by taking her to Heaven at the moment of her death without permitting her body to experience corruption. That was God's great reward for her dedicated and sinless life on earth. She is a model of living faith in God for all the missionaries who suffer for no fault of theirs. They too will be raised one day from the tomb of death to the womb, namely the loving embrace of God.

The Mother who forms the missionary disciples of Jesus

Mary, who brought forth Jesus in his human form, lived for him and Jesus, as a child and as a young man, had experienced her loving care for 30 years at Nazareth. Mary, who brought forth Jesus in his human form into this world and who also listened to his teaching, preaching and witnessed His caring, knows how to guide us to become today's disciples of Jesus, as zealous evangelisers. She, who was invited by Jesus to transcend her biological motherhood and to become the spiritual mother of all his disciples, knows how to guide today's evangelisers and missionaries to transcend their family-ties in order to serve people, especially the abandoned ones, the neglected ones.

The modern evangelisers and missionaries need to remember always that Jesus, at the foot of the Cross, had entrusted His Mother to John who represented all the disciples of Jesus at the foot of the Cross (Jn 19:26). Jesus wanted John and all who would accept Him (Jesus) as their Saviour, to take His mother Mary to their own lives (as their spiritual mother) and

learn from her how to be His good missionary disciples in today's world. Mary, who not only brought up but also learnt from Jesus to accompany Him in the saving mission of people from sin and evil, is a great and precious gift of Jesus to us. Therefore we need to love Mary because she knows how to form us in the likeness of Jesus to become Spirit-filled evangelisers and ardent missionaries in difficult situations.

Mary knows our needs

Mary is portrayed in the Gospels as one who is very observant and sensitive to the felt-needs and struggles of people. It was very evident at Cana where she and Jesus were invited to share the joy of a wedding feast. What others had not noticed, Mary, who was the wife of a worker, soon became aware of the embarrassing situation of the persons who had invited a house-full of guests. The late comers did not have that which was needed to share in the festive joy. To save the hosts from that embarrassing situation, Mary appealed immediately to Jesus to do what was needed. Mary is the wonderful mother whom Jesus has gifted to us because Jesus knows the virtues of His mother. He knows that she is observant and compassionate and always appeals to Him to relieve people of their anxieties and pains. Let us love her for she cares for us; she knows what each one of us need in order to lead a worthy life as disciples, evangelisers and missionaries of Jesus. She is our intercessor with Jesus. Let us approach her with confidence for never was it known that anyone who fled to her for loving care and protection was left unaided as the prayer, "Memorare" has it.

A Missionary Voice with the voiceless

Mary was a good evangelizer because Mary's heart was burning with the love of God and love of people. When we prayerfully reflect on the "*Magnificat*" (Lk 1:46-55), we come to know the mystical and the prophetic dimensions of her spirituality. She praises and rejoices in God while saying God's mercy reaches everyone in need of liberation from destitution, oppression and marginalization. **Her missionary spirituality can awaken in us great desire to be rooted in the Word of God and become not only "voice of the voiceless" but also "voice with the voiceless masses",** the forgotten masses, who are victims of injustice and exclusion. She, who accompanied Jesus in His missionary journeys, knew Jesus was against injustice and oppression of human beings. Therefore, we can say that our missionary spirituality should also embody the virtue of justice.

"It seems that the Church in our time is crossing the Rubicon from a land of privatized piety accompanied by deeds of charity to individuals, at times outstandingly splendid deeds, to a frontier imbued with a spirituality of justice."¹ In the present context, the piety of Mary is inviting us to be empowered with a spirituality of social and ecological justice in relation to the world-situation.

To Ponder the Word of God

Prayerful reflection on the texts of the Sacred Scripture, which

¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Consider Christ,, The Crossroad Publishing Company ,370 Lexington Avenue, New York,NY 10017, 1995, p 79.*

speaking about our Blessed Mother Mary and her missionary activities, will surely inspire and motivate us to do good to people, especially to the abandoned and to nature (creation). As I have mentioned earlier in this article, Mary was one who pondered over the Word of God (Lk 2:19; 52) and acted with loving kindness. Therefore let us learn to do likewise and be animated to love and care for the suffering masses and Mother Nature with inspiration drawn from the Word of God.

Mary is before Apostles

Speaking about the place of women in the Church, Pope Francis says, “Mary is much more important than the Apostles”. Mary is before the Apostles. “If you want to know who she is you ask the theologians, if you want to know how to love her you have to ask the people. In turn, Mary loved Jesus with the heart of the people, as we read in the Magnificat. We should not even think, therefore, that thinking with the Church means only thinking with the hierarchy of the Church” (Pope Francis, Interview with the Jesuit newspaper *La Civiltà Cattolica*).

15.

COMPASSIONATE PERSONS RESPOND TO THE CRY OF THE POOR AND THE ABANDONED

Very few people today will say that poverty is a blessing. Poverty has emerged as a moral evil and it is a great enemy to joyful living. Poverty destroys human freedom and makes certain good qualities and virtues impracticable and difficult. Many poor people are powerless, downtrodden, oppressed and marginalized in contemporary Sri Lanka. They lack social power and prestige.

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference and Asian theologians understand poverty as economic deprivation. They see the vast dimension of hunger, disease, malnutrition and unemployment and millions of Asians living below poverty line, deprived of access to goods, services and opportunities to lead decent lives worthy of human dignity and as children of God.

JESUS SPOKE OF THE POOR

Jesus spoke of the poor, not about poverty. For Him the poor are children of God and are blessed by God. He proclaimed that He was sent by God to preach the Good News to the poor (Lk 4:18). He spoke of a God who blessed the poor and the oppressed and brought the Good News that they would be set free and that God's Kingdom belonged to them (Lk 6: 20: 23; 4:16-22; 12: 32). Through His life and ministry, He manifested God's love and concern for the poor. His compassionate love led Him to identify Himself totally with

the poor (Mt 25:40-45). He taught His disciples to love the poor. What moved Jesus to identify with the poor and respond to their pains was His spirit of compassion.

In the teachings of Jesus, 'love' is not merely an affective emotion which is expressed in friendship. This is love (philia) that binds friends together (Lk 11:5). Jesus also spoke of a love of effective concern (agapeic) which manifests itself in responding actively with much sensitivity to the concrete needs of the neighbour (Lk 10:29-37). The effective agapeic love means doing good to the neighbour with much respect (G.M. Soares-Prabhu, SJ). The love that would be directed more especially to the poor rather than to the rich is compassion. Because the poor are the ones who suffer deprivation and destitution, they elicit feelings of compassion (Albert Nolan, OP).

Compassion proclaimed by Jesus (Lk 6: 36) demands responding to the material and social needs of the poor (Mt 25: 31-40), bringing the Good News of liberation to the poor (Mt 11:5) and setting the oppressed free (Lk 4:16-18) and bringing them fuller life.

JESUS' ACTION ON BEHALF OF THE POOR

God became human in Jesus to show God's compassionate love for all human beings especially for those who suffer. The Gospels tell us how Jesus expressed His compassion for the widow who had lost her only son and how He brought him back to life (Lk 7:12-14). St. Mark's account in chapter 8:1-10 shows Jesus is moved to action by His sensitivity to the crowd's hunger. In chapter 6:34-35, Mark shows Jesus

perceiving the hunger of the people for food and guidance since they were also like sheep without a shepherd. In both accounts, we see Jesus' perception and sensitivity to the physical needs for nourishment and also for spiritual need for guidance (Wilkie Au, SJ, *By Way of the Heart*).

THE APOSTLES AND THE EARLY CHRISTIANS

The Apostles learnt from Jesus how to care for the people and they did not forget the poor. St. Paul says that James, Peter and John – these leaders – insisted that he and his helpers should remember to assist the poor and that he (Paul) was anxious to do so (Gal 2:10; Rom 15:25 f).

The early Christians practiced material sharing within their communities. Sharing of material goods was a result of the union of hearts and sharing within the Christian community at a deeper level –*koinonia*- (Acts 2: 44-45; 4:32-35). Due to the spirit of sharing which existed in the early Christian communities, there were no social barriers based on race, status and gender. There were no distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, free persons and slaves, females and males (Gal 3:27; Col 3:11).

The communion of the early Christians under the impulse of the Holy Spirit moved them to reach out to the poor living in other communities. Thus material sharing was also practiced between the Christian communities (Acts 11: 29-30; 24: 17; 45: 25 ff; 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8: 7-8 Gal 2:16).

The Community of Antioch was sending goods to the community of Judea who were victims of famine (Acts 11:

21-30). Luke records that each one at Antioch contributed according to each one's means. Similarly Christians of Corinth, Galatia and Rome also shared with the Christians of Jerusalem. St. Paul was very anxious to have collections made since he regarded it as a sign of communion (koinonia) between Christian communities he had founded and those of the Judeo- Christians.

IN OUR CONTEXT TODAY

Quite aware that many families in our parishes are struggling to lead lives worthy of human dignity (without proper house, unemployed or under-employed, sick, parents/elders abandoned, oppressed by the powerful) can we say that the celebrations of 'church feasts' and 'church jubilees' in many parishes truly manifest our Christian faith and solidarity of compassion. We know that simplicity is a virtue.

Shouldn't the rich in our parishes understand the moral obligation to cut down their expenses on unnecessary consumer items and share in order to enable the deprived, the weak and the disadvantaged to live with dignity as human beings and as children of God?

1. Relief to the needy

Immediate response to situations which arise due to disasters, both natural and human, is certainly a charitable action. In fact, individuals and Institutions in our dioceses have responded to the painful cries of people who were affected by floods, Tsunami, ethnic war, Bomb blast on Easter Sunday in 2019, Covid-19). Like the ambulance that rushes immediately

to rescue the victims, the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka has acted in the above-mentioned situations. But Christian spirit of compassion should not be limited only to emergency situations (which I would like to call ‘ambulance apostolates’) which are very much needed in disaster situations. But in the normal day to day situations, the Presbyters, the Religious and the members of mandated organizations / Societies in the parishes need to adopt suitable methods which can empower the poor while educating them to resist their compulsion to be seduced by advertisements which also constantly create new wants.

In Sri Lanka, the National SEDEC and the Diocesan Social Action Centres were begun by the Catholic Hierarchy for socio-pastoral action to improve the quality of life of the suffering masses. Such an apostolate embodies action for justice, peace and integrity of creation. Training of social animators for action at the parish level was an integral part of the apostolate of SEDEC and the Diocesan Social Action Societies. Such an apostolate continues to exist in some parishes where Self-help and mutual help societies (e.g shramadana societies at village level, co-op societies, Societies for non-violent action for justice) are promoted. Unfortunately, the mission-vision of some presbyters in some parishes in Sri Lanka is focused more on the buildings.

2. Action for justice

Compassionate persons working genuinely for the upliftment of the needy and those in pain, will meet sometimes situations of the needy and those in pain and also will meet sometimes situations of oppression and injustice caused by individuals

and organizations / Institutions. Such situations can cause feelings of anger. Hence it is important that such compassionate persons understand the true nature of such anger. Dominican Albert Nolan who had worked for the liberation of the people in South Africa for many years had said, “God’s compassion is always accompanied by anger and indignation. They are two sides of the same coin, because one cannot really love and have real compassion if one is not able to get angry and indignant. This is not the anger of hatred or selfishness; it is the anger of compassion”¹. Today, however, it is necessary for many individuals and organizations to learn how to manifest such anger non-violently, assertively (by telling the truth with gentleness) and bring about the desired legitimate goals.

¹ Albert Nolan, *Hope in the Age of Despair*, St. Paul’s Press, 58/23rd Road, TPS 111, Bandara, Mumbai-400 050, 2012, p 97

16.

PEOPLE-ORIENTED APOSTOLATE TO BRING FULLER LIFE TO THE POOR

The ordained ministers in the Catholic Church are leaders of Christian communities, called to follow the teachings of Jesus and imitate his life-style. Just as Jesus' people-oriented life was concerned with revealing the unconditional compassionate love and forgiveness of Abba (the Kingdom of God) to people, and inviting them to respond to Abba's love, the ordained ministers must also be formed and trained to imitate Jesus' way of serving the neglected and the marginalized with much love and humility.

Jesus appeared among people as a humble servant of the Kingdom of Abba, not as a lord. He became human to bring abundant life to people (Jn 10:10). He was able to say "*I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me...and lay down my life for my sheep*" (Jn 19:14). He appeared as a feet-washer, a servant of the people. For his Movement (Jesus Movement), Jesus enlisted both men and women and taught them and trained them to proclaim the message of the Kingdom of God by word and deed to people.

In his missionary journeys St. Paul showed himself as a humble servant of the people whom God loved. He manifested his love for Jesus by serving the people with a network of co-workers. We see such a partnership in the letter to the Romans, chapter 16.

We need a people-oriented pastoral ministry in Sri Lanka which is also collaborative in the way it is exercised in the dioceses and in the parishes involving the participation of dedicated and competent individuals and groups (lay faithful and Consecrated Religious) to nourish the life of the faithful. The Catholics accept that their bishops are the leaders of the Catholic Church and that the parish priests are leaders of their parishioners. **But today the problem is not about leaders but about leadership.** We like to see how they, imitating the Apostles and St. Paul (Gal 2:8-9), exercise partnership. We see how collaborative leadership is being exercised by Pope Francis. He says that we should not even think that thinking with the Church means only thinking with the hierarchy of the Church. Cardinal Walter Kasper says that Pope Francis wants a listening Magisterium that makes its decisions after it has heard what the Spirit says to the churches.

In many of our parishes, certain ministries have become very much institutionalized and centralized catering to individuals and special groups. A meaningful pastoral ministry must include personal contact, communication and consultation with the people who are in need of love, care and protection.

Pope Francis speaking to thousands of priests during this Jubilee Year of mercy urged them to stay close to the poor and the excluded. He said: “As priests we identify ourselves with people who are excluded. We remind ourselves that there are countless masses who are poor, uneducated, prisoners, who find themselves in such situations because others oppress them.” Pope Francis warned that priests are often blind to people who are suffering, sometimes due to an excess of

complicated theology or an excessive ‘bubbly’ spirituality, or a ‘light’ spirituality. He also said that we are also oppressed and trapped by the allure of a thousand commercial advertisements.

Jesus came out of prayer to care for the people in need. May our life of prayer –intimacy with Jesus- make us also to care for the people, especially for those in greater need.

17.

SHARING WITH THE POOR

I am writing this article because I believe that our liturgical life can lead us to practice deeds of loving service to the needy in our parishes. We are aware that in our parishes - in the estates, in areas coastal, rural and urban – there are people who do not have proper shelter and the means to educate the children and care for the sick. Hence let us focus our attention on the way our Catholics celebrate their church-feasts.

1. **Flag Staff**

Many parishioners are in the habit of making even ‘vows’ to decorate the flag staff. For many it has become a religious ritual.

2. **Procession with the statue**

Large sums of money collected and spent to decorate the streets.

3. **Crackers**

Large sums of money spent on fireworks especially during the procession along the streets.

4. **Celebration at home**

Let us think of the atmosphere the families create for enjoyment with the relatives and friends.

5. **The Dress**

The comportment the parishioners display for the Novenas, the ‘Vespers’ and the Festive Mass.

Time to Reflect Prayerfully

We need to reflect and ponder prayerfully on the above-mentioned situations in our parishes in the light of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, the Word of God, the community spirit of the early Christians, the Social Teachings of the Catholic Church and the words and gestures of Pope Francis and bring our beliefs from the ideational level to visible and tangible behavior patterns through concrete deeds of compassionate love.

Living in the midst of the poor and the needy members of our parish communities, we need to recall the words of Jesus of Nazareth recorded by St. Matthew in chapter 25:40: “I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these followers of mine, you did it to me”. Let us therefore not limit the real presence of the Risen Jesus to only his sacramental presence at the altar and the tabernacle, but also to his real presence in the poor, the neglected and the uncared.

Deeds of Loving Service

I believe that our parishioners will respond very generously and willingly to the plight of the poor in the parishes if they are sufficiently motivated by meditating on the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Let us also reflect on the concern and care, St. Paul manifested for the poor living in Jerusalem. We too therefore need to be people-oriented in our parishes imitating the ministry of Jesus and of St. Paul.

Is it not possible for us have parish-based organizations with well - motivated Catholics who will set aside at least 10 % or 20 % of the money they spend for the new dresses, for

enjoyment at home, for decorating the flag staff and the streets in order to create a Fund to promote education of the poor children, care of the sick and those who do not have proper shelter in the parishes? Pope Francis is asking us to resist the spirit of consumerism and the tendency to waste.

Even during the season of Lent, the parishioners especially the well-to-do can be motivated to deny some enjoyment in order to create the needed Fund. What about the Jubilees in the Parishes? Won't they be occasions to consolidate the Fund to assist the parishioners in need? Is it not possible for the parish-based organizations to find jobs / employment for the poor? Let us also think of the many parents who may be practicing birth control because they do not have the wherewithal to ensure education or obtain admission of children to a good Catholic school.

We know that some parishes have already begun assisting the poor and the needy through the initiative of zealous priests. Fund (s) created for assisting different categories of the needy financially will remain functioning even after the parish priest is transferred to another parish or institution or other ministries. Thus, this type of planning remains a parish policy.

Sacrifices made to share generously with the needy will manifest the joy with which the poor also will celebrate the church-feasts and church-Jubilees. Let us recall to mind what Sts. Peter, James and John had insisted when St. Paul met them in Jerusalem. St. Paul wrote to the Christian community in Galatia saying, "The only thing they insisted on was that we should remember to help the poor, as indeed I was anxious to do".

18.

IN SEARCH OF AN ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY

(A background Paper with a power-point presentation, for a one-day seminar conducted for the Asian Lay Associates of the Holy Family Sisters of Bordeaux on May 6, 2009 at Holy Family Convent, Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka).

1. TODAY'S PAINFUL CRIES OF NATURE AND OF HUMANS

A) Nature is damaged, injured and raped.

- Fresh water, clean air, fertile soil and protective ozone layer are being ruined by chemicals that human beings have dumped in the water, sent into the air and into the earth, causing also global warming, climatic change, melting of glaciers.
- Human beings are becoming responsible for the ill-health of the planet earth. They are turning the planet earth – the home of all living beings – into a wasteland, an unsuitable place for life.
- Through destruction of habitats (natural home of organisms), hundreds of life forms, species which took thousands of years to develop are being rapidly being destroyed by human beings.
- As a result, besides homicide, suicide and genocide, we are witnessing **biocide** (death of the species – living organisms) **geocide** (death of the soil) and **ecocide** (death of the environment).

- More than 70 % of the earth's surface is covered by water but 97 % of the water is in the ocean and is too salty to drink. Of the fresh water available, over 2 / 3 is contained in ice caps, glaciers, and permanent snow, leaving less than 1 % of earth's water available for human consumption. With ever-increasing pollution of water this too is fast decreasing.
- Many medicines come from the tropical rainforests which took thousands of years to grow. But two – thirds of rainforests in the world, including the rainforests of Brazil, have been cut down and cannot grow again, to what they were, for hundreds of years. Such actions have been done by money-greedy people who are bent solely on quick profit.
- Nuclear build-up is threatening the total extinction of the earth with all its living beings.
- The bishops of the Philippines, in a pastoral letter condemned the devastation of the tropical forests in their country. They said: 'Our country is in peril. All the living systems on land and in the seas around us are ruthlessly exploited. The damage to date is extensive and, sad to say, is often irreversible.'

The bishops of U.S.A in a document entitled, *Renewing the Earth* said, 'Safeguarding creation requires us to live responsibly in it, rather than managing creation as though we are outside it.' We should see ourselves, they added, "as stewards within creation, not as separated from it".

- Speaking of the earth, our common home, also as a sister, Pope Francis, in his Encyclical Letter, *Laudato*

Si, says, "This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her" (no 2).

B) People have become victims of oppression

- A minority in the world feels itself to be the owner of the earth; this group exploits the natural resources of the world for its benefit, denying the rights of the majority to lead a life worthy of human dignity. 195 million of human beings do not have a place to lay their heads. The number living in absolute poverty in 1992 stood at 11.2 billion. Today more than 2 billion in the world are living below poverty line. In Sri Lanka, one fourth of the population of 21 million people is living below poverty line.
- The teaching of the 2nd Vatican Council is that the whole universe must be equitably shared by all the people. (*Gaudium et Spes* 69)

Disrespect and lack of care for human and infra-human beings cause diminishment of life of humans and nature.

- "It is myopic in thinking that human welfare is possible without the well-being of the rest of the planetary community. Instead of this shortsighted, narcissistic ethics we need a holistic ethics that broadens our vision and gives us a cosmic consciousness." "It is high time that we acknowledged that we are turning our home, this living planet earth into a wasteland, an unsuitable place for life. If environmental degradation continues we would be

killing not only ourselves but also the earth – the only life sustaining system known to us.”¹

- Political will is needed to promote environmental policies at local, national and international levels designed to grind to a halt the present destruction and aimed at healing the damage already done. As Christians we need to gather our energies and to see caring for the earth as central to our Christian vocation. Planet earth is the new poor.

C) Diminishment of life on earth is due to anthropocentrism and neo-capitalism

The mechanistic – dualistic paradigm of the 16th and 17th centuries provided the people the dominant mechanistic worldview which produced the kind of science and technology that tried to dominate the world.

Anthropocentrism (man-centredness) with its concomitant dualism of body / soul and male – female, has given human beings power over the natural world which, in turn, is seen as raw material to be manipulated by human beings for their own purposes and betterment. The writings of Francis Bacon, René Descartes and Issac Newton provided the intellectual justification for the drive to manipulate and conquer nature (Sean McDonagh, *Passion for the earth*)

“Anthropocentrism is the most deadly sin of our age. It is the arrogance and self-inflation whereby humans set themselves up as masters of creation and proceed to lord it over other species, over nature, and inadvertently, over God too. It is the compulsive masculine urge that seeks to divide and conquer everything it encounters, vividly and barbarously expressed in

¹Joseph Peruma CMF, *Motherly Earth*, pp vii-viii

the oft-quoted words of Francis Bacon: ‘We must keep torturing nature ‘til she reveals her last secrets to us’.’²

The industrial and consumer culture that has been let loose by the neo-capitalist ideology bent on profit, supported by media, is widening the gap between the rich and the poor nations and also between the rich and the poor within nations. It is also injuring and damaging the biosphere in such a way that its regenerative capacity is taxed and this results also in the diminishment of life on earth of all future generations of human beings and other creatures.

Disrespect and lack of care for humans and nature cause diminishment of life.

“The earth which sustains humanity must not be injured. It must not be destroyed.” (Hildegard of Bingen)

D) ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION NEEDED

“Man, especially in our time, has without hesitation devastated wooded plains and valleys, polluted waters, disfigured the earth’s habitat, made the air unbreathable, disturbed the hydrogeological and atmospheric spheres and turned luxuriant areas into deserts and undertaken forms of unrestrained industrialisation, humiliating the flower-garden of the universe to use the image of Dante Alighieri (Paradise,XX11,151). We must therefore encourage and support the ‘ecological conversion’ which in recent decades has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophe to which it has been heading” (Pope John Paul II during a general audience on January 17, 2001).

² Diarmuid O’Murchu, *Poverty, Celibacy and Obedience*

- “When it comes to the natural world, we are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones, which cannot be violated.”¹ (Pope John Paul 11 in *Evangelium Vitae*, no 42).).
- Our present way of living is unsustainable. Unless we change our behaviour we will pass on an ugly and run-down planet to future generations. We must begin to live more simply, avoiding waste wherever possible.
- A partnership ethics demands that even as we receive we also contribute to maintain the fertility and the integrity of the earth. Taking without any sensitivity to replenish smacks of childish selfishness.
- “Ethic of enough” is needed to live simply, avoiding waste wherever possible.

E) NEED FOR AN ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY

“It is shaped by a distinctive way of thinking and feeling: one that emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things, the intrinsic value of all life, the continuity of human with non-human life, and the compassion of God for all life.”¹

The preservation of the environment is the key to our having a viable future on the planet. Global warming and its dire consequences are the most distressing experiences today. This concern about the future of the earth and its woundedness is one of the experiences that has given birth to ecological spirituality.²

¹ J. Mc Daniel, *Earth, Sky, Gods and Morals developing an Ecological spirituality*, 1990 in Waaijman,2002 .. Quoted by Jean Evans RSM in *Spirituality* ,Vol 14,May-June 2008,p 166). ² Jean Evans RSM in *Spirituality* ,Vol 14,May-June 2008,p 166

Flourishing of life is the will of God

“Since God sent Jesus into the world to make life flourish, (Jn 10:10), anything that diminishes life is against the will of

God. Jesus showed that God is the Source of abundance and not of scarcity (e.g Jn 2 (plenty of wine); Jn 6 (plenty of bread); Jn 21 (plenty of fish). Constant message of the Holy Bible is that all creation is meant to sustain and nurture life on earth. Devastation of the earth by human beings is against the spirit of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

“Jesus’ vision of the Reign of God includes wholeness and *shalom* for all creatures, even the least important in the present hierarchy of values, the nonhuman.....For those who follow Jesus, not self-interest but respect for all of God’s creatures is what should hold sway.”³

A Christian theology of creation can learn much from the attitude of respect which Jesus displayed towards the natural world. He enjoyed an intimacy with nature which is evident from his parables – the sower and the seed (Mt 13:3-9,18-23), the vine and the branches (Jn 15:1-17; Mk 12:1-12).

The Holy Bible affirms the goodness and the sacredness of God’s creation. Christian liturgy recognizes that God is the source of life for all creatures and for the fruitfulness of the earth.

“...Jesus’ example inculcates an attitude of wonder and appreciation for the natural world.....As many of his parables and sayings reveal, he was in tune with the

³ Elizabeth A. Johnson in *Consider Christ*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 370 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10.017, 1995., p 140).

beatitudes of the earth, seeing in them a reflection of aspects of God who sends rain on the just and the unjust. Exploitation and destruction of the earth and its creatures are foreign to this kind of attitude.”⁴

Survival of human life depends on the survival of planet earth

- **Creation has its own rights**

We are living at a time when the issue of the rights of the non-human beings, of the earth is finally emerging. The issues of the sufferings of the earth – of its waters and air, its soil and forests – are coming to the fore with the ecological movements highlighting the issue.

- “But even the Bible is clear on the fact that the *raison d’être* of creation is not found primarily in its ability to meet human needs. It has its own dignity, its own rights and reasons for being, quite apart from its role in sustaining humans.”³
- “A partnership ethics demands that even as we receive we also contribute to maintain the fertility and the integrity of the earth. Taking without any sensitivity to replenish smacks of childish selfishness. The earth provides everything; we have a sacred duty to keep it natural, beautiful, and healthy. Excessive extraction of natural resources, excessive use of chemicals in agriculture, dumping the earth with toxic wastes and such other ecological vices are real crimes of the day with deadly consequences that depersonalize the motherly earth and arrest our creativity, We share the destiny of the earth. We share the benefits as well as the liabilities.”⁵

⁴ ibid p 140; ⁵ Joseph Peruma CMF, *Motherly Earth*, pp vii-viii

F) NEED FOR AN ECOLOGICAL CATECHESIS

1.Celebration of Sacraments

- a) Water for the Sacrament of Baptism
- b) Oil for the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Orders, Anointing of the Sick.
- c) Bread and wine (food) for the Sacrament of Eucharist

Offertory Prayer

“Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation,
Through your goodness, we have received this bread to offer,
Fruit of the earth and work of human hands,
It will become for us the Bread of Life.

Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation,
Through your goodness, we have received this wine to offer,
Fruit of the wine, and work of human hands,
It will become for us our spiritual drink.

2.The Commandments of God

- “Thou shall not kill” must include **the sins of biocide, geocide and ecocide.**
- “Thou shall not steal” includes exploitation of natural resources without concern for the poor. Private ownership is not an absolute right. It has social obligations.

19.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY TO BRING FORTH LIFE

Catholic Church and the Care of the planet earth

The Catholic Church though it has a commendable record in the area of human rights protection and social justice since *Rerum Novarum* Encyclical of May 1891 by Pope Leo XIII, it was slow and late to recognize the gravity of the problems facing the environment and our planet Earth.

However, in a document issued by Pope John Paul II, on January 1, 1990 for the World Day of Peace, "*Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all Creation*" (1990), the Pope attempted to alert the world to the extensive damage that was being wreaked on our planet and especially on vulnerable ecosystems, like rainforests, coral reefs and the oceans. The Pope was adamant that Christians had an obligation to care, not just for other human beings but for the earth itself. He stated that: "*Christians, in particular, realize that their responsibility within creation and their duty towards nature and the Creator are an essential part of their faith*".

The Pope returned to the topic with greater urgency and alarm during a general audience on January 17th, 2001. He called for an ecological conversion. On that occasion the Pope stated that: "if we scan the regions of our planet, we immediately see that humanity has disappointed God's expectations. Man, especially in our time, has without hesitation devastated wooded plains and valleys, polluted waters, disfigured the earth's habitat, made the air unbreathable, disturbed the hydrogeological and atmospheric spheres and turned luxuriant areas into deserts and undertaken forms of unrestrained industrialization, humiliating the flower-garden of the

universe to use the image of Dante Alighieri (Paradiso, XXII, 151.). **We must therefore encourage and support the 'ecological conversion' which in recent decades has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophe to which it has been heading.** Man is no longer the Creator's 'steward', but an autonomous despot, who is finally beginning to understand that he must stop at the edge of the abyss".(emphasis mine)

It is obvious that **our present way of living is unsustainable.** Unless we change our behaviour we will pass on an ugly and run-down planet to future generations. To avoid creating a hell on earth each one of us must begin to live more simply, avoiding waste wherever possible.

“ As one called to till and look after the garden of the world (Gen 2:15), man has a specific responsibility towards *the environment in which he lives*, towards the creation which God has put at the service of his personal dignity, of his life, not only for the present but also for the future generations. It is the *ecological question* – ranging from the preservation of the natural habitants of the different species of animals and of other forms of life to “human ecology” properly speaking – which finds in the Bible clear and strong ethical direction, leading to a solution which respects the great good of life, of every life.....when it comes to the natural world, we are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones, which cannot be violated.”¹

Spirituality of Jesus

The story of Jesus is recalled to empower conversion from the greed and disrespect which lead people to rape the earth for

¹John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae*, Vatican City, 1995, no 42)

profit which Jesus called ‘mammon’. Jesus’ vision of unconditional love includes wholeness for all creatures, even the least important, the non-human. He lived lightly characterized by simplicity of life and warned against hoarding and getting enticed by wealth (Mt 6:19-21).

No ready-made answers to today’s ecological crisis.

In the Holy Bible and in the life of Jesus, we do not find ready-made answers to today’s ecological crisis. However, our living faith is able to flash the light of the living Word of God to the modern ecological issues and obtain enlightenment and wisdom and become responsible to care for the earth.

“Today, more than in other ages, the call of evangelical poverty is being felt also among those who are aware of the scarcity of the planet’s resources and who invoke respect for and the conservation of creation by reducing consumption, by living more simply and by placing a necessary brake on their own desires.”²

Moreover, nuclear build-up is threatening the total extinction of the earth with all the living beings.

From Social justice to eco-justice

In recent years, ecological crisis that started afflicting the world has caught the attention of the scientists, the theologians and others. The environmental degradation is making the scientists, the spiritual theologians and other thinkers to take up the question of humanity’s survival since the survival of the human race depends on the survival of the planet earth. So we are living at a time when the issue of the

² Pope John Paul II in *Vita Consecrata*, Vatican City, 1996, no 90)

rights of the non-human beings, of the earth is finally emerging. The issues of the sufferings of the earth – of its waters and air, its soil and forests – are coming to the fore with the ecological movements.

Religious thinkers (Theologians) are beginning to assert the intrinsic value of the natural world and to consider nature as the new poor and hence action on behalf of justice is being extended to include non-human beings. New scientific creation story and spiritual theological thinking tell us that there is no humanity without connectedness with nature. Human welfare is not possible without the well-being of the rest of the planetary community. In other words, human beings are basically dependent on non-human creatures for survival. A new consciousness about **the community of life of all creatures** is emerging today.

The message that comes out of the Holy Bible is that the goods of this world are meant to sustain all human life on earth (Genesis). The teaching of the 2nd Vatican Council is that the whole universe must be equitably shared by all the people (Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*).

The first few decades of the 20th century saw a shift from the mechanistic-dualistic to the holistic-ecological paradigm. The mechanistic-dualistic paradigm provided the dominant worldview. The shift in worldview has affected every field of human experience: our living and the way we deal with nature. The impact is becoming more pronounced in the 21st century.

Creation: Demonstration of God's love

God's word, 'dabar' is creative and action oriented. God's word is love. God is love. In God word and love are identical. When we say, by its nature love is expressive and creative, we

say God is creative and expressive. It generates life. To **demonstrate His love, God created the human beings and the the world (Gen 1) and everything in it and keeps it alive.** God made the earth bring forth a great many different kinds of plants and trees which are good and beneficial for human beings. Plants and trees provide food and shelter. Trees absorb carbon dioxide from the air and turn it into oxygen which the human beings need in order to breathe. Many kinds of life-giving medicines come from plants and trees (Gen 1:11-12). **The world is ultimately good and sacred** because it is created by God and reflects the wisdom and goodness of God. God Himself declared His creation good and delightful (Gen 1:31). Therefore God Himself affirms the intrinsic value of every created thing. Goodness is connatural to creation. There is nothing unclean or evil in creation. Impurity is not in things but it is in the perversion of the human heart. (Mk 7:18-22; Acts 10:15).

Choose life (Gen 2:7; Dt 30:19-20; Jer 21:8). To **demonstrate His love, God created the human beings; God wants human beings to choose life, not death.**

*“ Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (Gen 2:7-8).*The Hebrew word ‘*nephesh*’ translated into English as ‘living being’ means ‘person’ or ‘self’. So **a human being created by God is a total person**, not separate parts called body, and mind and soul. We are body, we are mind, we are soul. We are unified beings: a conjoined unity. We are en-spirited bodies, conscious bodies, bodies that can flourish and survive only in an atmosphere of harmony and connectedness with the natural world. It is through our bodies that life is passed from generation to generation. We do not create life. **We transmit life which is sacred because it is created by God.**

Creation is sacred, good, beautiful (Gen 1:10,12, 17,18, 31; 2: 9,15,20; Ps 104; 24:1-2). **It is blessed by God** (Gen 1:27-28). Creation is an original blessing of God, prior to sin. Affirmation of the intrinsic worth of everything created. Goodness is connatural to the world. Nothing is unclean in creation. Uncleanliness is not in the thing but in the perversion of the heart. Creation is holy ground. God delights in His creation.

“Praised be You, my Lord, by our Sister, Mother Earth,
Who sustains and govern us
And who produces varied fruits and coloured flowers and
herbs.”

(From *the Canticle of St. Francis of Assisi*, patron of Ecology)

Creation declares the glory of God. Ps 8; 19: 1-6; 104; Dan 3:57-88; Sirach 42:15-225;43 (entire chapter); Is 45: 15-25).

Biblical exegesis tells us that the Hebrew words, abad= till, service; shamar= keep, preserve, defend {from harm} in Gen 1:26, in 1:28 and in 2:15 as ‘subdue, dominion over’ mean ‘to be stewards, guardians, caretakers’ who are answerable to God for the way in which they use His world. The work of the human beings is to develop the earth and keep it in good order, to care for the earth. God has made them responsible for looking after the earth. The Muslim Scripture, the Quran uses the word “khalifa” which means ‘to be a deputy who is answerable to the supreme ruler’(John Hargreaves, *A Guide to Genesis*).

Everything in creation to be used in a caring way

“Everything in life is gift given for nourishment and therefore not intended to be usurped or destroyed destructively. To sustain something in being requires renewed effort and devoted love, not the competitive or antagonistic behaviours

that seek to undermine and exploit another..... Everything in creation belongs to a context and needs to be used in a caring and responsible way within the evolving nature of the context in which it is given.”³

Through the Sacraments, creation becomes the vehicle of divine life. To administer the sacraments, we require the natural elements – water (Baptism), Oil (Confirmation, Holy Orders, Anointing of the Sick), bread and wine (Eucharist).

In the Offertory Prayer of the Eucharistic celebration, the ordained minister says the following prayers:-

Blessed are you Lord, God of all creation.

Through your goodness we have received this bread to offer,
Which earth has given and human hands have made.

It will become for us the Bread of Life.

By the mystery of this water and wine

May we come to share in the divinity of Christ,

Who humbled himself to share in our humanity.

Blessed are you, God of all creation,

Through your goodness we have received this wine to offer
Fruit of the vine and work of human hands.

It will become for us our spiritual drink.

At the Anointing of the Sick, the ordained minister says:

God of all consolation.

You chose and sent your Son to heal the world.

Graciously listen to our prayer of faith:

Send the power of your Holy Spirit, the Consoler,

Into this precious oil, this soothing ointment,

This rich gift, this fruit of the earth.

³Diarmuid O’Murchu, *Poverty, Celibacy and Obedience*, Pauline Sisters, 143 Waterfield Rd, Bandara, Mumbai 4000 050, p 66.

Bless this oil and sanctify it for our use.
Make this oil a remedy for all who are anointed with it.
Heal them in body, in soul, and in spirit,
And deliver them from every affliction.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son....

Blessing of water during Easter Vigil:

Lord our God,
Be with us as we recall the wonder of your creation
and the greater wonder of our redemption.
Bless this water: it makes the seed to grow,
It refreshes us and makes us clean.
You have made of it a servant of your loving kindness:
Through water you set your people free,
and quenched their thirst in the desert.
With water the prophets announced a new covenant
that you would make with man.
By water, made holy by Christ in the Jordan,
You made our sinful nature new
In the bath that gives rebirth.
Let this water remind us of our baptism;

Celebration of the Feast of Resurrection of Jesus

The Preface of Easter rejoices in the fact that the Spirit of the Risen Christ “renews all creation”.

PRAYER

O God, enlarge within us a sense of fellowship with all living things, our brothers and sisters the animals, to whom thou gavest the earth as their home in common with us. We remember with shame that in the past we have exercised the high dominion of man with ruthless cruelty, so that the voice of the earth, which should have gone up to you in song, has been a groan of travail. May we realize that they live not for

us alone but for themselves and for Thee, and that they love the sweetness of life.

A prayer of St. Basil the Great

- **God, our Creator,
You have given us the Earth, the Sky,
the Rivers and the Seas.
Show us the way to care for the Earth
not just for today but for future generations.
Let no plan of ours damage or destroy
the beauty of your creation.**

Today's crimes against human life

1. against life: abortion, euthanasia, murder, genocide, willful suicide.
2. against integrity of life: mutilation, physical and mental torture under psychological pressures.
3. against human dignity: sub-human conditions, prostitution, selling of children, child abuse, violence against women, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, , degrading working conditions, treating people as tools for profit rather than full and responsible persons.
4. against human rights: Amos 5:24
 - discriminations based on racial, cultural, political, religious, colour, gender differences
 - violence and terrorism.
 - Unjust and unlawful methods of oppression.
 - Oppression of minorities
 - Stock-piling of conventional, chemical or nuclear weapons, arms race.
 - Unfair distribution of world's resources

Acknowledgments

I owe special thanks and a debt of gratitude to **Aloysius Pieris, SJ, Albert Nolan, OP and John Fuellenbach, SVD** in the preparation of the above articles. Their writings have stimulated my reflections in a very special way.

I am grateful also to **Leopold Ratnasekera, OMI** for reviewing all the articles and to **Prof. Shirley Lal Wijesinghe** for offering me useful suggestions.

Emmanuel Fernando, OMI