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MINISTRY OF "LISTENING DEEPLY" IN AN INCULTURATED CHURCH IN NORTH VIETNAM[1]

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Abstract. This synodal process foregrounds the relevance of "listening deeply" as a ministerial praxis which is grounded in a mystagogy with a theology of God's corporealization in creation/cosmos[2] through the incarnation, and a spirituality of interiority discerning God's communication *ad extra* and *ad intra* facilitated by the everyday exercise of Cosmic One-ing. This ecclesial praxis is relevant in the synodal process of communal discernment. Church leaders/ministers need to be formed in this ministerial practice to become truly inculturated communities that integrate their faith with the local living traditions of the faithful. At the same time, the faithful also incorporates the other living traditions of the primal and world religions of their co-pilgrims. In this way, inculturation thus enhances the evangelizing mission of the local Churches of Asia.

[1] GenAI Disclosure Statement. The author declares that no GenAI tools were used in the conception, research, analysis, and writing of this manuscript.

[2] See Mark I. Wallace, "The Wounded Spirit as the Basis for Hope in an Age of Radical Ecology," in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, edited by Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 51-72.

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Introduction

The notion of doing ecclesial ministry has morphed from the days of Vatican I to Vatican II, and to the FABC. This process of change over the centuries is like a metamorphosis, which is influenced in large measure by: first, the paradigm shifts in the ecclesiological notion of being Church in *aggiornamento,* particularly since Vatican II; second, the interrelated shifts in the underlying presuppositions in soteriology, missiology and spirituality. All these shifts foregrounds the relevance of all the processes of communal discernment in a synodal Church. This paper examines the evolution of the notion of ministry in terms of a concentric circle in section one. Section two explains this ministerial praxis of "listening deeply" as integral to the theology of God's Mission.[3] This ministerial praxis is described as a mystagogy with the praxis of Cosmic One-ing which facilitates two interrelated moments in section three. The fourth section situates this praxis within the synodal processes. The final section explains an inculturated Church as a situated context for the exercise of this ministry of "listening deeply" to God in local ecclesial communities.

1. Ministry as a Concentric Notion

My personal understanding of ministry from the past to now has expanded. This maturation process is like a concentric circle. In the past, ministry has always been an extended engagement in the parish, engaging in particular activities like organizing the masses, attending the regular events such as meetings and gatherings of the BECs,

[3] Heartfelt gratitude to Scholastic Nguyễn Huy Kim SJ for his sharing of his pastoral experience in his regency on the 1st of May, 2026. in which the phrase "listen deeply" struck a chord in my heart based on his reflection of the Jesuit pastoral ministry in the seven parishes in the Bac Ninh Diocese of North Vietnam

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acting as a guide of the youth ministry, visiting the poor in the slum-dwellers, the homes of the workers of the factories, the oil palm and rubber plantations, participating in the charismatic prayer group, given formation to the leaders of the CSS (Catholic Students Society in the universities) and the YCW (young Christian Workers). These ministerial engagements are motivated by a soteriology and ecclesiology that "*God's salvation can also be found outside of the Catholic Church*" alone. This notion then transitioned to "*God's salvation is found outside of the Catholic Church*" as God's Kin-dom[4] is beyond the confines of the formal religions. Now the ecclesio-soteriological framework is "*God saves humankind and otherkinds in ways only known to God albeit unknown to us (cf. Nostra Aetate/ NA* §2*), including other planets and multiverse in our cosmos.*" It is humbling to realize that the fullness of understanding God's known ways will only be known when we "see God face to face" (1 Cor 13:12).

2. *Missio Dei* with a Theology

"Listening deeply" calls for re-imagining ministry as our participation in God's Mission (*Missio Dei).* This accentuated emphasis has to be kept in view even when we engage in ministry that is diocesan (participation in the triple functions of the episcopal mission), national (participation in the mission of the Philippine Church), regional (participation in the mission of the triple dialogue of the FABC) and global (participation in the mission set forth by Vatican II).

God's mission is cosmic, planetary and particular. God initiated this divine mission when God "decides to other Godself" in the act of creation through the creative power of *Rûah Elohim.* On God's othering of Godself, Origen explains, "God is one, who created and set in order all things, and who, when nothing existed, caused the universe to be."[5] According to Teilhard de Chardin, "creation is now

[4] In the ASEAN usage, the word Kin-dom highlights the relevance of being kins to one another under the reign of God enjoying fraternity, solidarity, justice and peace.

[5] This is taken from Parch II, 1–2, 12–18, quoted in Henri Crouzel, *Origen*, trans. A.S. Worral (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), 182.

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seen to be, in some sense, a reflection of God outside of Himself rather than within Himself."[6] What is for Origen "causing the universe to be" is confirmed by Mark I. Wallace who avers that "the Creator Spirit (*ruah*) breathes the world into existence and thereby enfleshes itself in the creation and maintenance of the natural order."[7] Once created, creation becomes, as it were, God's "mission ground" in which God is present and active. God's saving presence and actions take on a sharper focus in the incarnation, which focalized God's presence and mission in one particular planet (Earth), country (Israel), hometown (Nazareth in Galilee) and birthplace (Bethlehem in Judea).

Like Jesus, God invites us to engage in God's mission. The incarnated God, as the Word-made-flesh (Jn:1-3), is the divine presence in our hearts that capacitates us to respond to God's call as co-creators so that we engage in God's mission. We are graced to collaborate intimately with God solely for God's glory. In other words, we listen to God so that we do what God desires of us. Through our ministries, God draws God's people closer to God. Through us, God ushers in God's Kin-dom of fraternity, justice, peace, and promotion of the global commons. In this way, our co-creative ministries[8] contribute to God's cosmic mission of bringing about a new earth, a new heaven and a new creation (Is 65:17; 66:22; Rom 8:19-23; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; Col 1:1-20; Phil 3:20-21; Rev 21-22), whence God is in all, over all, and all in all (Eph. 4:6).

3. A Mystagogy with One-ing and Two ways

Our ecclesial ministry as the baptized, the consecrated and the ordained (BCO) calls for the ministry of "listening deeply" as discerning disciples of Jesus in Asia. We listen to God's communication *ad extra* in

[6] Donald P. Gray, *The One and the Many: Teilhard de Chardin's Vision of Unity* (London: Burns & Oats, 1969), 19.

[7] Wallace, "The Wounded Spirit as the Basis for Hope in an Age of Radical Ecology," 58.

[8] The term co-creative ministries denote that God invites us to be co-creators with God in God's co-creative ministries.

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creation, in the cries of the wounded earth and the vulnerable on the margin of the church and society because God has pitched a tent in our midst (John 1:14). We also listen deeply to God's communication from within (*ad intra*) the recesses of our hearts.[9]

Engaging in the everyday practice of the one-ing exercise is important to facilitate two interrelated moments of "listening deeply." One-ing with everyone and everything in one's immediate and distant milieu is illustrated in this exercise I composed, entitled *Cosmic One-ing*.

> I invite you to be seated comfortably.
>
> Close your eyes. Breathe in and out.
> Now enter into a state of consciousness.
>
> Become conscious of the presence of God's Spirit.
> Become conscious of the abundance of light, joy, peace and communion, in and around you.
>
> Allow God's Spirit to move you into this state of communion, of one-ing with everyone and everything.
>
> Moved by God's Spirit, I feel one with everything in my room.
>
> I am one with the chair that I sit on. The chair is one with me.
> I am one with the table that I work on. The table is one with me.
> I am one with the laptop, with the books. The laptop and books are one with me.
> I am one with the plants and flowers inside and around my house. The plants and flowers are one with me.
>
> I am one with the cat and dog in this house. The cat and dog are one with me.
> I am one with this everyone, every animal, every plant in and around this house. Everyone, every animal and plant is one with me.

[9] In the last statement of no. 34 of *Redemptoris Missio*, this encyclical concludes, "Hence missionary activity ad intra is a credible sign and a stimulus for missionary activity ad extra, and vice versa." See John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, December 7, 1990, Encyclicals, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html.

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I am one with every child, youth, woman, man, one with every bee, bird, flower, every tree in this town. All of them in this town are one with me.

I am one with every inhabitant, every hill, peak, pond, lake, river, forest, valley in this country, in Asia, and they are all one with me.

I am one with the air, the sky, the clouds, with every ocean, every continental landmass, every snow-capped peak, every nation, every citizen, all lifeforms, all minerals on this earth. They are all part of me. They are one with me.

I am one with planet Earth, with all other planets in this solar system, with every galaxy and the Milky Way, every universe in this cosmos. They are part of me. They are one with me.

This whole cosmos is part of me, and this vast cosmos is one with me.

All the particles flow in this cosmos flow in and out of me. I feel they are part of me, and I am one with all particles in this cosmos.

God's Spirit is energizing all lifeforms in this cosmos and energizing me. God's Spirit unites all of us in this one-ing, in this cosmic communion.

We are one in this cosmos, this planet Earth, united as one in God, by God's Spirit.

Now let us return to this state of consciousness of one-ing, in this cosmic flow of one-ing with everyone and everything.

Let us become conscious that we are seated on this chair, in this room.

Gradually return to your body.

When you are ready, gradually open your eyes.

Feeling grateful, joyful and peaceful in your heart.

The *ad extra* listening calls for a contemplative attentiveness to God's communication through discerning the signs of the times,

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because God speaks through (a) the splendor of our cosmos (multiverse with plural galaxies and milky ways), (b) what is happening to Mother Earth/nature (the climate polycrisis), and finally, and (c) the events in our global (energy insecurity due to hike in oil prices due to the geopolitical tensions in the Persian Gulf), regional (tension in the Strait of Hormuz) and local world (monetary subsidies for employees' purchase of diesel and petrol).

Second, we listen to God *ad intra*, which calls us to live in a contemplative state of being during our daily personal prayer and examen as these incidents affect us in ways that we do not yet comprehend. Through "listening deeply," we hear God speaking to us in the deep recesses of our hearts, in the form of an inspirational idea/image, accompanied by deep consolations like peace, joy, and tears that motivate us in undertaking certain initiatives/pathways. This presupposes a personal interiority which is related yet different from the daily recitation of the divine offices and other formal/said prayers. In fact, daily personal prayers and *examen* require a discerning attitude and disposition during moments of silent presence to the Triune God, the celestial assembly of angels, ancestors, mystics, prophets, sages, and Mother Mary, awaiting their communications that move our emotions (delight and solace), psyche-spirit-soul that affirm, convert/transform and motivate us both in our being so that we are increasingly free to allow the Triune God to act on our behalf through different agencies/agents, humans and institutions alike.

4. Listening Deeply: A Synodal Process

This "listening deeply" befits the three years (2021-2024) synodal processes that is local, regional and global. These processes are initiated in preparation for the 2024 synod on synodality and the Ecclesial Assembly in October 2028. These *Pathways*, prepared by the General Secretariat of the Synod, are part of the General Secretariat's service of accompaniment during the implementation phase of the Synod

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on Synodality.[10] These synodal processes involve the plural BECs, organizations and movements in the local parishes, the dioceses, the regional Bishops' Conferences in what is known worldwide as the "Conversation in the Spirit" or "Spiritual Conversation." These conversations engage "listening deeply" so that the Church Universal is in a state discernment, accompanied by the Risen Lord, journeying together, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In this "listening deeply" together on this synodal journey, the whole Church disposes herself to learn through her rich joyful and hurtful experiences by deeply listening to God's Spirit which enables Her to live a deeper communion, to promote participation, to open Herself to mission, as envisioned by Vatican II.

5. Formation within an Inculturated Church

Becoming an inculturated church calls for formation in the mystagogy of "listening deeply" with its theology and spirituality. First, the theology of "listening deeply." According to the vision of FABC, a localized Church is "incarnated in a people, indigenous, inculturated, a church in dialogue with the living traditions and religions,"[11] which brings forth an inculturated church. Filipino theologian Jose Mario C. Francisco rightly postulates, "the decisive new phenomenon for Christianity in Asia will be the emergence of genuine Christian

[10] The second session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (the Synod on Synodality) was held in Rome in October 2024. This followed the initial session held in October 2023, marking the conclusion of the assembly's general sessions, with the final document approved on October 26, 2024.

[11] "FABC - Contributions of the Church in Asia to the Universal Church," *Facebook*, September 10, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=430792389149381, citing the First Plenary Assembly, "Evangelization in Modern Day Asia," Statement and Recommendations, in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970-1991*, edited by Gaudencio Rosales, DD and Catalino G. Arevalo, SJ, vol. 1 (Quezon City/Maryknoll, NY: Claretian Publications/Orbis Books, 1992), p. 14, par. 12.

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communities in Asia–Asian in their way of thinking, praying, living, communicating their own Christ-experience to others."[12]

In other words, "listening deeply" attunes the leaders/ministers to the salvific movements of the Triune God in the given contexts and the marvelous ways by which God's Spirit is guiding the dialogue between the Gospel and these diverse local contexts. As Mario Francisco insightful posits:

> [In] this dynamic of evangelizing, inculturation comes about through a 'dialogical encounter process understood in its deepest meaning that comes from the salvific movement of the Triune God because evangelization itself is above all a dialogue between the Gospel and the given reality.' It is not a mere 'adaptation of a ready-made Christianity into a given situation.' Through this universal dialogue, the presence of the Spirit is found in each context and we can reflect on the historical forms with which the Gospel is preached.[13]

Therefore, this dialogical encounter process calls for "listening deeply" to the aspirations, joys and sorrows of those in the parishes, the schools and other ecclesial contexts. Through an ongoing process of communal discernment, "listening deeply" gradually ascertains the heartfelt desires of the faithful to further inculturate the faith in their local contexts so as to enhance their evangelizing mission.

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[12] Jose Mario C. Francisco, "Inculturation in Asia and Reform in the Church," *La Civiltà Cattolica*, February 10, 2017, https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/inculturation-asia-reform-church/, citing FABC, "Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church," Conclusions, in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970-1991*, edited by Gaudencio Rosales, DD and Catalino G. Arevalo, SJ, vol. 1 (Quezon City/Maryknoll, NY: Claretian Publications/Orbis Books, 1992), p. 70, par. 14.

[13] Francisco, "Inculturation in Asia and Reform in the Church," citing International Congress on Mission, "Local Asian Churches and the Tasks of Mission: Inculturation," Consensus Paper Workshop II (CPW II), in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970-1991*, edited by Gaudencio Rosales, DD and Catalino G. Arevalo, SJ, vol. 1 (Quezon City/Maryknoll, NY: Claretian Publications/Orbis Books, 1992), p. 138, pars. 6-7.

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To attune the communities, it becomes imperative that the baptized, the consecrated and ordained leaders/ministers are formed in this mystagogy with its underlying spirituality and theology. It means spearheading a collaborative ministry in which the baptized, the consecrated and the ordained work together. Second, such collaboration calls for pooling the the diverse competencies and resources to offer ongoing formation of the committed leaders/ministers of the different parishes, schools and related ministries. The aim is to awaken these ministers to engage in the building up of inculturated communities through the various ecclesial ministries. This formation in inculturation has two interrelated moments: first, the integration with their own living local traditions, and second, with the other living traditions of the primal and world religions in their midst. Such ongoing faith formation aims to facilitate the inculturation of their faith in the local contexts so as to empower the faithful in their evangelizing mission. In this way, the leaders/ministers are capacitated with the necessary knowledge and skills to exercise a discerning sensitivity in their everyday interaction, understanding and incorporation of the attitudes, dispositions, values, worldviews of their own living traditions, and also those of the primal and world religions.

A case in point of an inculturated Church is reflected in the faith-life of the parishes situated in northern Vietnam.[14] In closing my eyes, the melodic chants find deep resonance in the recesses of my heart as I listen contemplatively to the faithful engaging in chanted prayers before and after Mass. These chants are characterized by a slow, rhythmic, and nasal cantillation, related to traditional, indigenous melodic chants/practices known as *Đọc Kinh* (or *Ngắm* in specific contexts). *Đọc Kinh* (or *Ngắm) is known to recourse to* ancient Vietnamese poetic forms and local melodic traditions integrated into the worship of the Catholic faithful in the daily and weekend masses. The early missionaries[15] recourse

[14] Based on my personal observation, participation in the St. Joseph Feast Day Celebration on April 27, May 1 and 2, 2026 in the sub-parishes of Hiệp Lực, Thanh Hoa and Thanh Hà, outside of Hanoi, northern Vietnam.

[15] The early Jesuit missionaries responsible for composing *Đọc Kinh* or *Ngắm* are Alexandre de Rhodes SJ (1591-1660), Girolamo Maiorica SJ (1591–1656),

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to chants (often in the *song thất lục bát* poetic form, or "double seven, six eight") that were adapted from traditional Vietnamese folklore and folk-style theatrical lamentation (*chèo*, *tuồng*). These chants make different Catholic devotions more accessible to Catholics in local parishes during regular liturgical and feast-day celebrations, such as their devotion to St. Joseph on May 1st and the month of Mother Mary in May and October. Nevertheless, these chants, including the *Ngắm Mùa Chay* (Lenten meditations) and others, have been preserved and inculturated across different dioceses throughout Vietnam, often with minor variations that match local dialects and tonal structures.

Such devotional chants point to a living stream of popular religiosity of the Catholic faithful in Vietnam, at once local and Catholic. The integration with their local living traditions as *Kinh* has become a communally embodied religiosity which forms a bedrock of their vibrant faith which is now deeply *integrated into* their worship. This embodied religiosity is dynamic because it is a living faith which is inextricably *interwoven with* their living local traditions. This firm bedrock forms the ecclesial matrix that reflects a collective memory of passing on the lived traditions in a process which I call "historic tradition-ing" in the last four centuries of a dynamic efforts at inculturation of the faith in the Church of Vietnam. And it is truly an inculturated Vietnamese faith of the majority of the *Kinh* who have embraced Catholicism since the 17th Century. It is the living Catholic tradition that keeps alive the *sensus fidei,* an internal, Spirit-led capacity for the faithful to discern truth in accordance with the Gospel, allowing them to "*sentire cum Ecclesia*" (think/feel intimately with the Church) as an inculturated Vietnamese Church. Looking in as an outsider, I recognize in all humility that the Gospel communicated by the early missionaries from Europe is today a felt and lived Catholic faith with a Vietnamese face, praying in *Đọc Kinh*, worshiping in unison of mind and heart the God known to the faithful as *Thiên Chúa*.[16]

Francisco de Pina SJ, Gaspar do Amaral SJ, and Antonio Barbosa SJ.

[16] Warmest gratitude to Fr. Phạm Quang Khanh SJ for proof-reading this paragraph on an inculturated Vietnamese Church.

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"Listening deeply" as a mystagogy has enabled the missionaries of the past and today to inculturate the Catholic faith in the various living traditions of the *Kinh* Catholics. Gradually, the *Kinh* baptized, consecrated and ordained missionaries will inculturate the Catholics of the indigenous communities, such as the Jarai, the Hmong, Khmer… etc. This mystagogy will certainly facilitate the further inculturation of the faith/church in the *Kinh*'s plural living traditions and the incorporation of the noble values of the living traditions of fellow neighbors and co-pilgrims of the primal and world religions in the urban and rural residences.

Conclusion

Amidst the ebbs and flux of life in the Church universal, occasioned by the ever-changing yet updated theological presuppositions, aggiornamento draws the Church to the need for a ministerial praxis of personal and communal discernment. This process of discernment involves engaging in this ministry of "listening deeply" as a synodal Church to the signs of the times based on identifying the mega-trends which affect the grassroots/*minjung*/*tao* people. Moreover, the signs of the times are revelatory of God and God's saving actions as God faithfully communicates through the splendor of creation/cosmos, in particular, the *han*/cries of the poor and the wounded earth.

An inculturated Church, with the faith deeply embedded in the living traditions of the faithful, becomes the necessary context for engaging in the ministerial praxis of "listening deeply" to God. This praxis opens the Church to be guided by God's Spirit in becoming a synodal Church, characterized by intimate communion and active participation, with committed engagement in the Church's evangelizing mission. In this mission, inculturation is inseparable, as we allow ourselves to be encountered by God in and through the everyday interaction/dialogue of life with the religious Other who are steeped in their plural living religio-cultural traditions with their multifaceted richness of the popular religiosities of the primal and world religions in Asia.

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