Doing Contextual Theology:

Standing Meditation as an Instrument for Missionary Evangelization in Today's Vietnam

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Introduction

Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) defined theology as "fides quaerens intellectum" (faith seeking understanding). This definition eventually became a traditional definition of Christian theology. However, this definition is inadequate when doing theology in our contemporary time.[1] According to Father Antonio M. Pernia, SVD, contemporary theology should be both "fides quaerens intellectum" (faith seeking understanding) and "fides quaerens linguam" (faith seeking expression)."[2] This means that faith must be both intellectual and expressed in missionary activities.[3]

Standing Meditation or "SM" was born and raised in the heart of the Vietnamese people and culture. It has become a significant and profound introduction of the liturgical celebrations of Holy Week, with its content mainly taken from the

1 Antonio M. Pernia, SVD, "Theology Whose Heart Is Mission," *Loyola School of Theology,* http://lst.edu/academics/landas-archives/965-qtheology-whose-heart-is-missionq-address-of-fr-antonio-m-pernia-svd-at-lsts-commencement-exercises-on-may-11-2016 (accessed on June 20, 2016); Dias, *Rooting Faith in Asia* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2005), 180; Phan, *In Our Own Tongues*, 179; and Budi, "Doing Theology in Asia: In the Service of Life," 131-33.

2 See Pernia, "Theology Whose Heart Is Mission."

3 Pope John Paul II, *RM*, no. 11.

passion episodes of the four Gospels.[4] Throughout the history of the country, especially the Vietnamese Catholic Church, this popular devotion developed as a "spiritual nourishment" of the faithful even though it is seemingly forgotten at times. For this reason, this article will attempt to express SM as a means of evangelization in Vietnam today by describing SM in three dimensions: as an expression of faith-seeking-proclamation, good practices, and prophetic dialogue.

SM as an Expression of Faith-Seeking-Proclamation

The *Ngắm Mùa Chay,* also known as *ngắm dung* (standing meditation), is a distinctly Vietnamese Lenten Catholic devotion. It was introduced by the Jesuit French missionary, Alexandre de Rhodes, who blended elements of Vietnamese poetry and theatre with the traditional Catholic practice of meditating on the Passion of Christ. Drums and gongs provide rhythmic accompaniment and the incorporation of physical gestures like bowing and kneeling engage the body in prayer. In this way, the people are immersed in a very dynamic and engaging way to the narrative of the Paschal mystery.

In *Evangelii Nuntiandi,* Pope Paul VI explicitly wrote, "There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom and mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed."[5] Indeed, SM functions as the entry point to the whole life of Jesus. In this manner, the researcher will argue the following three aspects of Jesus' life as his proclamation.

4 SM's content is like the content of the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius which is also composed from the four Gospels in 1522-1524 (See George E. Ganss, SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: A Translation and Commentary* [Chicago: Loyola Press, 1992]). Father Alexandre de Rhodes (Đắc Lộ), a French Jesuit missionary in the seventeenth century, composed standing meditation. It is a product of the incarnation of the Gospel into Vietnamese culture.

5 Pope Paul VI, *EN*, no. 22.

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Standing Meditation as the Gospel Proclamation Through Presence and Witness

Talking about mission as bearing witness by silently living with others, Pope Paul VI explicitly said:

> Proclamation must be made above all else by witness... By bearing such silent witness, these Christians will inevitably arouse a spirit of inquiry in those who see their way of life. Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? Why are they among us? Witness of this kind constitutes in itself a proclamation of the Good News, silent, but strong and effective... The Good News proclaimed by witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life.[6]

Indeed, "Jesus [who was] the first and greatest evangelizer"[7] practiced mission in this way. He bore a strong and effective silent witnessing by sharing in the condition of humanity. He witnessed the Kingdom more in deeds than words. His passion and death were similarly strong and perfect.

Learning from Jesus' experience, the community of disciples proclaimed the Gospel by their own witnessing (Acts 2: 14-47). They sacrificed their lives for their mission by going forth and making disciples of all nations (Mt. 28: 19). The Church of today follows this missionary zeal of Jesus and his disciples. The FABC in particular, spoke of ways of truly being a Church in Asia through the following: as 1) a communion of communities, 2) a participatory Church, 3) a Church that faithfully and lovingly witnesses to the Risen Lord by reaching out to peoples of other faiths and a 4) Church that serves as a prophetic sign.[8] Meanwhile, Roger Schroeder offers a

6 Ibid., nos. 21-22.

7 Pope Francis, *EG*, no. 12 and Pope Paul VI, *EN*, no. 7.

8 Ibid., 287-88; and see Phan, *In Our Own Tongues,* 15.

simplified way of witnessing at home, in the neighborhood, at work, and in social situations.[9]

In Vietnam, one of the most prominent evangelizing figures is the Avignonese Jesuit, Alexandre de Rhodes who exemplified both a deep understanding of the Gospel and the Vietnamese culture.[10] His missionary life attracted the Vietnamese, such that the local people asked many questions about him.[11] After de Rhodes and the first missionaries, uncountable Vietnamese became witnesses of faith. More than 300,000 Christians were martyred during the era of persecution. Even now, many would silently proclaim the Good News through their daily witnessing.

One particular way of witnessing to the Gospel is gathering together to practice SM. Indeed, when non-believers look at the Vietnamese Christians practicing SM, they see unity and divinity. They recognize similarities between SM and the Vietnamese classical drama that could lead to attraction and possible participation. Hearing the Word of God, opens the way to transformation in faith. Thus, SM becomes a direct entry point to the Gospel of Jesus.

Standing Meditation as the Gospel Proclamation Through Public Ministry

The missionary spirituality of Jesus can be seen in Luke 4:18-19: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a

9 Roger P. Schroeder, *What Is the Mission of the Church? A Guide for Catholics* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 113-14.

10 Phan*, Mission and Catechesis,* 82.

11 Phan, *In Our Own Tongues,* 160-61.

year acceptable to the Lord." These he fulfilled in his public ministry.

First, Jesus came to liberate people from what hindered them from living the life God wanted them to live. He freed them from their sins (Mk. 2: 1-12; Lk. 7: 36-50; 19: 9), sickness (Lk. 7: 23), the devil (Mk. 3: 22; 16:9; Lk. 8: 2), oppressive interpretation of the Law (Lk. 13: 10-17; Mt. 12: 1-8), fear (Mt. 6: 25-34; 9: 2; 10: 28; Lk. 5: 10; 9: 51; 12: 32), and death (Lk. 7:11-17; 8: 49-56; Jn. 11).[12]

Second, he elevated their dignity by giving them new life in God. He laid down his own life and raised it (Jn. 10: 15).[13] Third, the essence of his proclamation was love. He constantly urged his listeners to love God and love each other with their whole heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mk. 12: 30-31). He taught them to love and forgive each other as he loved and forgave them (Lk. 6: 27-36; Mt. 18: 23-35; 25: 31-46; Jn. 13: 34; 15: 13). Furthermore, he prayed for their unity to the Father (Jn. 17: 20-23).

Fourth, he came "to give people hope for 'something more.'"[14] He spoke of the Kingdom in parables. He compared the Kingdom with a wedding party (Mt. 22:1-14), a banquet (Mt. 8: 12), a sower (Mt. 13: 24), a mustard seed (Mt. 13: 31), etc. Through his words and deeds, Jesus manifested that "his resurrection from the dead was the beginning of the final fulfillment which he promised."[15]

The Church continues Jesus' earthly ministry. She constantly goes to proclaim the Good News to every corner of the world. Mission is her very nature,[16] and her intention is to

12 Bacani, *Jesus Goes Public*, 33-37.
13 Ibid., 38-39.
14 Ibid., 44.
15 Ibid.
16 *AG,* no. 2.

share in the joys and hopes, griefs, and anguish of the people today.[17] The Second Vatican Council drew "a new awareness that missionary activity is a matter for all Christians, for all dioceses and parishes, Church institutions and associations."[18]

The strategy of the Second Vatican Council is to place missionary evangelization at the center of the Church's identity and mission. Popes Paul VI and John Paul II re-affirmed and re-described the missionary nature of the Church as holistic and integral in *EN* and *RM*. In *EN,* Paul VI described that a pastoral synthesis of evangelization must be salvation and liberation (*EN*, 9, 27, 30-38), dialogue with non-Christian religions (*EN*, 53, 80), religious liberty (*EN*, 39, 80), secularization (*EN*, 55), ecumenism (*EN*, 54, 76, 77), basic communities (*EN*, 58), diversified ministries (*EN*, 73), popular piety (*EN*, 48), etc. In *RM*, John Paul II said that evangelical activity must be holistic: "Jesus came to bring integral salvation, one which embraces the whole person..." (*RM*, 11); "evangelical witness... is directed towards integral human development" (*RM*, 42); "action on behalf of integral development and liberation... is most urgently needed" (*RM*, 58).

Similarly, Pope Francis reechoes in *EG* the relevance of missionary evangelization of the Church in our contemporary time. He asserts that we need an "evangelizing Church that comes out of herself," not a Church that is "self-referential" and "lives within herself, of herself, for herself." The Pope also adds, "I dream of a 'missionary option,' that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled

17 *GS*, no. 1.

18 Pope John Paul II, *RM*, no. 2.

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for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation ."[19]

Meanwhile, SM proclaims the Gospel through public ministry for the following reasons: First, SM is practiced in public places, and every person is invited to participate. Thus, when the faithful gather to practice SM, they become wordless witnesses of faith and love. They can "stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live."[20] for in today's world, people desire and respect authentic witness.[21]

Second, the content of SM is mainly taken from the Gospels. Practicing SM is like performing a drama on the passion and the death of Jesus. It makes the participants recall the sufferings of the Christians during the time of persecution. For the Vietnamese, death is more solemnly celebrated than birthdays and weddings. Consequently, SM becomes a direct proclamation of the Word of God because the participants directly listen to and understand the Gospel in their own tongue and culture. Thus, SM is a direct way of "bringing the Good News" or "telling Jesus' story" in the Vietnamese social-cultural context.[22]

Third, SM is a work of inculturation because it combines both the Scriptural passage and the Vietnamese drama. It is an effort of de Rhodes to insert the Gospel into the Vietnamese culture and insert the Vietnamese culture into the Gospel.

19 Pope Francis, *EG*, no. 27.

20 Pope Paul VI, *EN*, no. 21.

21 Ibid., no. 41; Pope John Paul II, RM, nos. 11, 42; and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), *Dialogue and Proclamation* http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html, (accessed on September 3, 2016), 10.

22 Pope Paul VI, EN, nos. 18, 22, 27, 42; Pope John Paul II, RM, nos. 44-51; PCID, *Dialogue and Proclamation,* 10; and Eilers, *For All the Peoples of Asia,* 4: 273-81.

The story of Jesus is narrated in a "new and eloquent expression."[23] This is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission in contemporary times.[24]

Lastly, the integral evangelization and proclamation will necessarily include liturgical life, prayer, and contemplation. No one can be effectively engaged in the Church's mission without a strong faith and prayer life. Evangelization needs holy men and women who are themselves on fire with the love of Jesus Christ.[25] SM makes its participants encounter a profound experience of Christ. It helps people become holy men and women by learning and following Jesus in their daily lives.

Standing Meditation as the Gospel Proclamation Through Empowering Message

Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom is an empowering message. Indeed, the Word of God enables the reader to see the root causes of human sins and provides a means of rescuing humanity through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is also creative, powerful, and transformative.[26] In his public ministry, Jesus invites the people to believe in the transformative power of the Word. In doing so, he describes the Word of God as a seed that falls on different kinds of soil (Mt. 13: 1-23). Like a seed, the Word of God has life in itself that will germinate and bear fruit if the conditions are right.

Recognizing the power of the Word in her life and mission, the Church constantly urges her children to listen to and live it. As stated in *DV*, the Church is born of and lives by the

23 Pope Francis, *EG*, no.122.
24 Pope Paul VI, *EN*, no. 20; and Pope John Paul II, *RM*, nos. 55-57.
25 Ibid., no. 10.
26 *DV*, no. 3.

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Word of God.[27] It sustains the Church throughout her history and permeates every aspect of the Church's life. Its power "can serve the Church as her support and vigor... as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life."[28]

In a similar vein, Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis speak of the empowering Word. In *EG*, for instance, the Word of God is described by the present Pontiff as "joy," or more specifically, "the Joy of the Gospel," which "fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus." Its power "is unpredictable" and "surpasses our calculations and ways of thinking."[29] Those who listen to and live the Word of God will be "set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness."[30] Thus, the Word of God must be the primary source in the life and mission of the Church and her various practices, such as spiritual exercises, retreats, devotions, and acts of piety.

Looking back at the history of the Church in Vietnam in the seventeenth century, we will better appreciate why de Rhodes created SM as an instrument of proclamation. As a Jesuit missionary and a disciple of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, de Rhodes was aware of the power of the Word of God in evangelization and catechesis. The more important question is, how did he do it? According to Peter C. Phan, first and foremost of de Rhodes's task was the translation of Christian theological terms, the Bible, and catechism into the local language.[31] For theological terms, de Rhodes tried to find the equivalent expressions of Christian terms in the Vietnamese

27 Ibid., no. 1.
28 Ibid., no. 21.
29 Pope Francis, *EG*, no. 22.
30 Ibid., no. 1.
31 Phan, *In Our Own Tongues*, 160-61.

language[32] and then wrote the *Catechismus* in the Vietnamese language. By looking at its content, one would be able to realize that it is similar to a concise Bible, full of Scripture passages.

Moreover, to make the Word of God simple and more convenient in use, de Rhodes composed SM as a way of helping people understand God's Word. For those who could not attend the Sunday Mass for different reasons, he encouraged them to gather together for prayer and devotions.[33] Actually, de Rhodes did not attempt to translate the Bible into the Vietnamese language. However, he created SM and composed *Catechismus*. Theologically speaking, SM is seen as a direct empowering message of the evangelical proclamation of the Gospel, which preserves and nourishes the faith of the people in Vietnam.

As mentioned, the Word of God carries a message of liberation and transformation. It brings people to mission and salvation. When Jesus began his public ministry, he went into the synagogue and read the Word of God. It became the divine power to encourage him to set out for his mission (Lk. 4: 14-30). Similarly, SM is the empowering message of proclamation because it expresses the passion and the death of Jesus. It becomes the strongest and most effective message through which Jesus proclaimed God's love to all people. The participants in SM will have enriched courage to live their faith. They never return empty from participating in SM. The history of the Church in Vietnam is a piece of concrete and strong evidence for this idea. She grows in various difficult circumstances of persecution, but her members have a steadfast faith in God because the Word of God sustains them.

32 Phan, *Mission and Catechesis*, 135-40.

33 Ibid., 98.

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Standing Meditation as a Way of Accepting Faith

John Paul II once said, "A faith that does not become culture is a faith which is not fully accepted, not wholly believed, and not faithfully lived."[34] Here, faith is Jesus himself—the Good News.

Faith means accepting Jesus: "the Word [*Logos*] became flesh and made a dwelling place among us" (Jn. 1: 14).[35] However, accepting faith is a slow and patient journey through which the seed of God's Word gradually infiltrates into the soil of the hearts of people. Theologically, accepting faith is a "double process of inserting the Gospel into a particular culture and inserting this culture into the Gospel."[36]

Along these lines, popular piety is a way for people—especially the poor and simple—to bring "people into contact with God in Jesus Christ."[37] If we carefully observe how SM is practiced, it is like a journey of sowing the Word of God into the hearts of the people. Saint Paul said, "Faith comes from what is heard" (Rom. 10: 17; *EN*, 42). Before accepting God's Word, people have to hear it first and let it gradually permeate in their hearts. Many Vietnamese non-Christians came to believe in God while practicing SM.

SM is considered a treasure of the Vietnamese Church and the soul of the Vietnamese people.[38] As Father Orlando O. Espín said, it is difficult to interpret the life and faith of

34 cf. John Paul II, "Address to the Italian National Congress of the Ecclesial Movement for Cultural Commitment," 2 (16 Jan. 1982).

35 *DV*, no. 2.

36 Pope John Paul II, *RM*, no. 52; and see Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, New York: Obis Books, 2004), 213-14.

37 Ibid.

38 Pope Benedict XVI, "Opening Address of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops" (13 May 2007), 1.

real Christian people because they "*sense* that something is true or not vis-à-vis the Gospel, or that someone is acting in accordance with the Christian Gospel, or not, or that something important for Christianity is not being heard." He calls it "faith-full" intuition, "the *sensus fidelium* [sense of the faithful] or *sensus fidei*."[39] This *sensus fidelium* is found in popular devotions, or popular piety, for "faith is understood as fundamentally a way of living or being," "rather than fundamentally a way of thinking."[40]

Through SM, the Gospel has been inculturated into the language and culture of the Vietnamese people. It is fully accepted in the fertile soil of Vietnam. Thus, SM is truly a way of accepting Christian faith in Vietnam, for it is "the expression of a purely human search for the divine."[41]

Standing Meditation as a Way of Internalizing Faith

When de Rhodes arrived in Vietnam to sow the seeds of the Gospel, his priority was to find appropriate ways to help the local people listen to and understand God's Word in their own language and culture. So, he composed daily prayers, SM and *Cathechismus,* and encouraged the local people to practice them daily. They often gathered together for popular prayers and devotions.[42] SM attracts Vietnamese people because it is performed like a traditional Vietnamese drama.[43]

39 Orlando O. Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 65-66.

40 Ibid., xxi.

41 Pope Francis, *EG*, no. 125.

42 Phan, *Mission and Catechesis*, 98-99.

43 CDWDS, *DPPL*, no. 92.

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This drama is a work of inculturation because it is a dialogue between the Christian faith and the local culture.[44]

In order to understand SM as a way of helping the Vietnamese faithful grow deeply in faith, we need to take a glimpse of de Rhodes's *Cathechismus*. De Rhodes paid attention to the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In SM, he recounted the stories of Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem, his betrayal by Judas, the Last Supper, his arrest, trials before Caiaphas and Pilate, his flagellation and crowing with thorns, crucifixion, death and burial. He encouraged the faithful to love the crucified Jesus by practicing these stories in SM.[45] The Vietnamese people fell in love while practicing SM because they hear and understand the Word of God through the declaimer's tone and enjoy traditional music and performance. Moreover, they feel that Jesus is in solidarity with them.[46]

According to Peter C. Phan, although de Rhodes mainly took the details of Jesus' passion and death from the Gospels, he did "not merely replicate [them] but put a personal stamp upon [them]"[47] by highlighting various portentous events which took place during Jesus' passion and death. In addition, de Rhodes seemed to understand the importance of death in the Vietnamese culture deeply,[48] so he urged the people to contemplate on showing tender love and compassion.[49] Through the death of Jesus, de Rhodes wanted to sow a hope of eternal life in the minds and hearts of the Vietnamese.

44 Thomas Bamat and Jean-Paul Wiest, eds., *Popular Catholicism in a World Church: Seven Case Studies in Inculturation* (Maryknoll, New York: Obis Books, 199), 111.

45 Ibid., 283-98.

46 Mercado, *Christ in the Philippines*, 55.

47 Phan, *Mission and Catechesis*, 192.

48 Phan, *Vietnamese – American Catholics*, 61.

49 Ibid., 93-95; and see CDWDS, *DPPL*, no. 80.

Phan concludes that though de Rhodes did not know "inculturation" or "offer any theory of culture," he inculturated the Gospel into the Vietnamese culture through his missionary works.[50]

Thus, looking at the way SM is practiced, the seed of the Gospel grew in the hearts of the Vietnamese people. It is a way of internalizing faith and solidifying one's relationship with Jesus.[51]

Standing Meditation as a Way of Living Faith

Faith must translate into action. Saint James said, "So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead... Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works" (Jam. 2: 17-18). This means expressing faith in one's daily activities.

In the Scriptures, several figures have demonstrated putting their faith into action. In OT, for example, Abraham, who is called "the father of faith," manifests his faith by setting out for a new land (Gn. 12: 1-3), believing his aged wife Sara will give birth to a son (Gn. 21), and is willing to sacrifice Isaac his only son (Gn. 22). Moses, another man of great faith, listens to God's call: "Go, I send you" (Exo. 3: 17) and responds by leading Israel towards the promised land (Exo. 3: 17). While in the wilderness, he places his people under the protection of God. Similarly, in the NT, Jesus' earthly life is a journey of faith. His death on the cross is the strongest and the greatest action of steadfast faith: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Lk. 23: 46), and "it is finished" (Jn. 19: 30). Mary, the mother of Jesus, is also a perfect example: "Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and observe it" (Lk. 11: 28).

50 Phan, *Mission and Catechesis*, 192.

51 Galilea, *The Challenge of Popular Religiosity*, 49.

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The Church is inspired to do missionary activities, liturgical celebrations, arts, and popular piety from these faith models.[52]

From here onwards, SM can be seen as a way of living Christian faith in Vietnam. First, living Christian faith means opening oneself up to the mysteries of the Gospel. Undoubtedly, SM helps people understand the mysteries of the Gospel because it brings them closer to the mystery of the passion and the death of Jesus.[53] The solemn atmosphere of the community, the chanting tone of the declaimer, the melancholic sound of the classical music, the platform's decoration, and how an individual meditation is practiced make the participants enter into and be in solidarity with the suffering Jesus. Participants feel that Jesus is not far from them but near.[54] This is similar to the Filipinos' devotion to the Black Nazarene of Quiapo. They open up to the mystery of Jesus Christ when they participate in the procession. They feel that by touching the sacred image, they would be transformed. [55]

Second, living Christian faith means having a good prayer life.[56] The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (CDWDS) defines popular piety as "those diverse cultic expressions of a private or community nature which, in the context of the Christian faith, are inspired predominantly not by the Sacred Liturgy but by forms deriving from a particular nation or people or from their culture, etc."[57] SM is a beautiful prayer of a particular

52 International Theological Commission (ITC), "Faith and Inculturation" (1998), no. 1.

53 Phan, "A Dramatic, 'Standing Meditation,'" 95.

54 Galilea, *The Challenge of Popular Religiosity*, 50.

55 Leonardo N. Mercado, SVD, "Filipino Popular Devotions in the Light of Evangelii Gaudium," *Missio Inter Gentes* 1, no.1 (January 2015): 57.

56 Galilea, *The Challenge of Popular Religiosity*, 49.

57 Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, no. 9.

community and culture. Adapting Benedict XVI's regard of popular Catholicism in Latin America, SM is a prayer of the community through which we see the devoted and fervent soul of the Vietnamese people.[58]

Lastly, living the Christian faith means putting faith into missionary activities. The Vatican II Fathers said: "The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary."[59] Through missionary activities, people "in many ways seek God in an attempt to touch him and find him."[60] Similarly, SM attracts people to participate in it. Every person would come to believe in God. Indeed, SM "makes them capable of generosity and sacrifice even to the point of heroism, when it is a question of bearing witness to belief."[61] As a popular Catholic devotion, SM "is the manifestation of the theology of life."[62]

SM as an Expression of Faith Seeking Prophetic Dialogue

This section attempts to define prophetic dialogue and SM as an instrument of prophetic dialogue toward missionary evangelization in Vietnam.

Understanding Prophetic Dialogue

Since dialogue is a familiar theme in many Church documents, papal statements, and theological discussions, a basic understanding of it will be discussed here. In Paul VI's *ES*, "dialogue" appeared in an official Church document for the

58 Pope Benedict XVI, "Opening Address of the Faith General Conference of the Latin America and Caribbean Bishops" (13 May, 2007), 1.

59 Vatican II, *AG*, no. 2.

60 Ibid., no. 3.

61 Pope Paul VI, *EN*, no. 48.

62 Pope Francis, *EG*, no. 125.

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first time. The Pope offered the entire part three to its understanding. An excerpt from it states:

> Here, then... is the noble origin of this dialogue: in the mind of God Himself. Religion of its very nature is a certain relationship between God and [human beings]. It finds its expression in prayer; and prayer is dialogue. Revelation, too, that supernatural link which God has established with [human beings], can likewise be looked upon as a dialogue. In the Incarnation and in the Gospel, it is God's Word that speaks to us... Indeed, the whole history of [human beings'] salvation is one long, varied dialogue, which marvelously begins with God and which He prolongs with [human beings] in so many different ways...
>
> This relationship, this dialogue, which God the Father initiated and established with us through Christ in the Holy Spirit, is a very real one, even though it is difficult to express in words. We must examine it closely if we want to understand the relationship which we should establish and foster with the human race.
>
> God himself took the initiative in the dialogue of salvation. "He hath first loved us." We, therefore, must be the first to ask for a dialogue with [human beings], without waiting to be summoned to it by others.[63]

Likewise, in a document entitled, "The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions," the Secretariat for the Non-Christians (later renamed the PCID) devotes a generous reference to dialogue. Here, dialogue is

63 Pope Paul VI, *ES*, nos. 70-72.

understood as "the norm and necessary manner of every form as well as of every aspect of the Christian mission."[64]

In *EG*, Pope Francis describes "dialogue" in a communal sense. He points out "three areas of dialogue" as the whole missionary evangelization of the Church. To express her mission in the deepest and best sense, the Church has to practice: "dialogue with states, dialogue with society-including dialogue with cultures and the sciences-and dialogue with other believers who are not part of the Catholic Church."[65] This expands *NA* and *AG's* narrower definition of dialogue as "interreligious."[66]

Meanwhile, FABC understands it in a broader sense by asserting that "dialogue has to take the shape of what has been called a 'dialogue of life.'"[67] In doing so, the FABC describes three features of dialogue: dialogue with people (especially the poor and the marginalized), dialogue with people of other cultures, and dialogue with people of other religions.[68]

In the light of the Church documents abovestated, the Fifteenth General Chapter Statement of the SVD added the adjective "prophetic" to "dialogue" because "the word 'dialogue' was not sufficient to express the full meaning of mission, especially mission seen as challenging unjust and sinful situations."[69] In addition, "prophetic dialogue" is the "deepest and best understanding of the call" of mission. It

64 The Secretariat for Non-Christians, "The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions" (1984), 29.

65 Pope Francis, *EG*, nos. 238-58.

66 "Nostra Aetate," no. 2 (hereafter *NA*); and *AG*, nos. 11-12.

67 Rosales and Arévalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 15.

68 Ibid., 14-16.

69 Ibid., 27.

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devoted three paragraphs to state what prophetic dialogue means:[70]

> Our discussions in the Chapter have confirmed that our understanding of *ad gentes* mission has shifted from an exclusively geographical orientation to one that includes missionary situations. From our constitutions, the work of recent Chapters, as well as the broader context in which our mission is carried out today, we identify four frontier situations where we hear a special call to respond: primary evangelization and re-evangelization, commitment to the poor and marginalized, cross-cultural witness, and inter-religious understanding.
>
> There are several ways of articulating this specific call to mission. We believe that the deepest and best understanding of this call is expressed in the term "Dialogue," or more specifically, "Prophetic Dialogue." Since Vatican II, dialogue with other religions has been promoted widely as one aspect of the Church's mission (*RM*, 5). Our specific commitment to this dialogue is reflected in our constitutions (c. 114) and the Statement of the 1988 General Chapter. However, already in the Vatican II documents, the term "dialogue," in all its richness, is used in a wider meaning to describe our proper attitude toward and relationship with all people. Dialogue is an attitude of "solidarity, respect, and love" (*GS*, 3) that permeates all of our activities. Limited as we are by our personal and cultural viewpoints, none of us has attained the whole truth contained in God and revealed fully in Christ. In dialogue, we search together for this truth.
>
> It is in dialogue that we are able to recognize "the signs of Christ's presence and the working of the

70 SVD Generalate, *In Dialogue with the Word: Documents of the XV General Chapter SVD* (SVD Generalate, Rome: SVD Publications, 2000), nos. 52-55.

> Spirit" (*RM*, 56) in all people, that we are called to acknowledge our own sinfulness and to engage in constant conversion, that we witness to God's love by sharing our own convictions boldly and honestly, especially where that love has been obscured by prejudice, violence, and hate. It is clear that we do not dialogue from a neutral position but out of our own faith. Together with our dialogue partners, we hope to hear the voice of the Spirit of God calling us forward, and in this way, our dialogue can be called prophetic. Furthermore, dialogue is not limited to intellectual exchanges. Through the dialogue of life, dialogue of common action for justice and peace, and the dialogue of religious experience, it finds expression in all aspects of our lives.[71]

Thus, "prophetic dialogue" means to play a prophetic role in dialogue as an approach in missionary evangelization. It "is not just a new catch-phrase... but a sacred commitment shaped by the Spirit."[72]

Standing Meditation and Dialogue with People

Looking at the Scriptures, we realize that the poor have a special place in God's heart. God expresses his concern for them in words and deeds by sharing their condition.[73] In this section, we are going to discuss SM as an approach to doing dialogue with all people, especially the poor in Vietnam.

Indeed, the OT tells us that God always expressed his concern for the poor by hearing their cry. For example, in the book of Exodus, God said: "I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry against their taskmasters, so I know well what they are suffering.

71 Ibid., nos. 52-55.

72 Pernia, "Prophetic Dialogue and the Formation of 'Persons of Dialogue,'" 27.

73 Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 15.

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Therefore, I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them up from that land into a good and spacious land... Now, go! I am sending you" (Exo. 3: 7-8, 10). In the NT, Jesus read from Isaiah's scroll and claimed that he was a prophet for the poor (Lk. 4:18-19). By becoming poor (2 Cor. 8: 9), [74] his heart had carved "a special place for the poor."[75]

Taking Jesus' footsteps, the Church also asserts her missionary option for the poor. In *LG*, the Council referred to the"The Church of the Poor" as the central theme of Vatican II:

> Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption on poverty and oppression, so the Church is called to follow the same path if she is to communicate the fruits of salvation to [human beings]. Christ Jesus, "though he was by the nature God... emptied himself, taking the nature of a slave" (Phil. 2: 6-7), and "being rich, became poor" (2 Cor. 8: 9) for our sake. Likewise, the Church, although she needs human resources to carry out her mission, is not set up to seek earthly glory, but to proclaim, and this by her own example, humanity, and self-denial. Christ was sent by the Father "to bring good news to the poor... to heal the contrite of heart" (Lk. 4: 18), "to seek and to save what was lost" (Lk. 19: 10).[76]

The FABC adopted the principle and introduced it during their first meeting in Manila. [77] Being the Church of the poor means witnessing "evangelical simplicity," promoting and defending the rights of the poor and the powerless, and avoiding "entanglement" with the rich and the powerful. Since

74 Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 15.

75 Pope Francis, *EG*, no. 197.

76 Vatican II, *LG*, no. 8.

77 Rosales and Arévalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 1: 5.

1974, the FABC has consistently promoted "The Church of the Poor" as its missionary orientation in Asia.[78]

Thus, the poor and the marginalized have a special place in God and His Church. However, how does the Church, particularly the Church in Vietnam, practice prophetic dialogue with the poor and the marginalized?

SM is a precious Catholic popular devotion that places an important position in the life of Vietnamese Christians. Using Paul VI's popular piety definition as "thirst for God which only the poor and simple can know,"[79] SM is a medium for seeking thirst for God by the poor and the simple. Thus, it can be used as an instrument of prophetic dialogue for missionary evangelization in Vietnam today.

In fact, in our own observation, the majority of the Vietnamese are poor in both senses: material and spiritual. Concerning material poverty, many people lack food, clean water, clothes, houses, job, health care. Whereas in spiritual poverty, many people lack education, social welfare benefits, knowledge, basic human rights, i.e., freedom of speech and religion. Moreover, most of them have not heard about Jesus and the Gospel.[80] The circumstances in Vietnam are difficult and complex. For example, Vietnam is currently governed by the Communist rulers who forbid and set many rules that hinder the missionaries from going to many areas for their mission activities. Thus, the main task of evangelization in Vietnam is to introduce Jesus to those who have not heard

78 Ibid., 15-16.

79 Pope Paul VI, *EN*, no. 48; and Pope Francis, *EG*, no. 123.

80 The current population, according to the latest statistics of March 31, 2015, was approximately 91,903,961. The percentage of the Catholic population in Vietnam is around 7.18 percent of the total population (See "Vietnamese Population," http://ww.countrymeters.info/en/Vietnam; and https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/C%C3%B4ng_gi%C3%A1o_t%E1%BA%A1i_Vi%E1%BB%87t_Nam (accessed on November 23, 2016)).

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about him.[81] And SM, as argued above, is useful and practical in telling Jesus' story to those people in the unreachable areas.

Fortunately, living in an agricultural culture, like other Asian people, the Vietnamese people are incredibly simple and hospitable. They tend not to argue with their mind but rather with their heart. Also, they "love to... link themselves to their past, to their customs and traditions, and to their cultural and religious roots."[82] Thus, to tell the story of Jesus to those people effectively, a missionary has to start with stories, songs, dance, symbols, and a compassionate heart. The missionary approach is thoroughly expressed in SM.

From an SVD's missionary perspective, the concern for the poor is palpable. When Fr. Antonio M. Pernia addressed the SVD members during the Sixteenth General Chapter, he said: "The two indispensable pillars of our vocation are: to be deeply rooted in the Word of God and to be in solidarity with the poor. Only in solidarity with the poor can we listen to the Word of God as Good News, and only God's Word has the power to transform the world of the poor."[83] Even though he did not directly talk about popular piety, the figure of SM is felt through his words.

In conclusion, doing evangelization requires prophetic dialogue with the Vietnamese people, especially the poor and the marginalized.

81 Tagle, "Mission in Asia: Telling the Story of Jesus"; and Pope John Paul II, *EA*, no. 10.

82 Edgar G. Javier, SVD, *Dialogue: Our Mission Today* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2006), 15.

83 SVD Generalate, *Prophetic Dialogue*, vol. 2 (SVD Generalate, Rome: SVD Publications, 2001), no. 73.

Standing Meditation and Prophetic Dialogue with People of Other Cultures

Besides doing prophetic dialogue with the poor and the marginalized, practicing prophetic dialogue with people of other cultures is also an urgent concern. In this section, the researcher will argue that SM can be employed as an evangelical instrument of prophetic dialogue with people of other cultures in Vietnam.

Culture is defined as "a plan for living"[84] and "a dynamic reality which a people constantly recreates."[85] Learning from Jesus, the Church is called upon to carry out her prophetic role of dialogue with the people of other cultures. He comes from "the culture of Heaven" to practice dialogue with people in "the human culture" (Phil. 2: 6-11; and Jn 1: 14). For example, through the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (Jn. 4: 4-42), Jesus made an excellent prophetic dialogue with the woman who came from a different culture. At the end of the dialogue, Jesus fulfilled her thirst for "living water." Furthermore, Jesus did not discuss culture with her but empathized with her condition. He respected her by patiently listening to her story. He expressed his deep solidarity and love. Moreover, he let his words gradually penetrate her mind and her heart. In doing so, Jesus adapted himself to the culture of the woman. Because of that, she recognized him as "a prophet" and then "a Messiah."

From the very beginning of the Christian mission, the Church was aware of the importance of dialogue with people of other cultures. She tried to look for an appropriate approach to incarnate the Gospel into the specific cultures of the

84 Donald S. McGavra, "The Nature of Culture," in *The Church and Culture: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology* ed. Louis J. Luzbetak, SVD, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 160.

85 Pope Francis, *EG*, no. 122.

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people it evangelized. This required of the evangelizers with regard to the local cultures as Jesus did with the Samaritan woman. For instance, in 1659, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (founded in 1622) instructed the vicars apostolic of Tokin and Cochinchina (Bishops Francis Pallu and Lambert de la Motte):

> Do not attempt in any way, and do not on any pretext persuade these people to change their rites, habits, and customs unless they are openly opposed to religion and good morals. For what could be more absurd than bring France, Spain, Italy, or any other European country to China? It is not your country but the faith you must bring, that faith which does not reject or belittle the rites or customs of any nation as long as these rites are not evil, but rather desires that they be preserved and fostered in their integrity. It is, as it were, written in the nature of all [human beings] that the customs of their country and especially their country itself should be esteemed, loved and respected above anything else in the world... Never make comparisons between the customs of these people and those of Europe; on the contrary show your anxiety to become used to them. Admire and praise whatever merits praise. As regards what is not praiseworthy, while it must not be extolled as what is done by flatterers, you will be prudent enough not to pass judgment on it, or in any case, not to condemn it rashly and exaggeratedly. As for what is evil, it should be dismissed by a nod of the head or by silence rather than by words, without losing the occasions when souls have become disposed to receive the truth, to uproot it imperceptibly.[86]

De Rhodes seemed to follow these instructions in Vietnam prior to the instruction. For instance, he adapted his personal

86 Joseph Neuner and Jacques Dupuis, eds., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (New York: Alba House, 1982), 309-10.

lifestyle to the local people's customs, habits, and rites. He translated Christian theological terms into the Vietnamese language by writing *Cathechismus*, SM, and daily prayers.[87] In addition, he formed lay leaders and catechists—both men and women—as nuclei of the Christian communities. He trusted them. They played the role of the leaders by leading the communities in prayers and devotions whenever the priests were absent. They could share with the missionaries in pastoral ministry. Significantly, many Christian women assumed various important positions. This never happened before in a patriarchal society.[88] Furthermore, he promoted to have native clergies and established a hierarchy in Vietnam. On September 29, 1659, his effort paid off when Pope Alexander VII established two apostolic vicariates with two bishops: Francois Pallu (1626-1684) and Pierre Lambert de la Motte (1624-1679).[89] Thus, we can see how de Rhodes did a prophetic dialogue with the Vietnamese culture at that time.

Similarly, Popes Paul VI and John Paul II also affirmed the importance of doing prophetic dialogue with people of other cultures. In *EN*, Paul VI said: "Evangelization is to be achieved, not from without as though by adding some decoration or applying a coat of color, but in-depth, going to the very center and roots of life. The Gospel must impregnate the culture and the whole way of the life of [human beings]."[90] Meanwhile, John Paul II contributed the following:

> Through inculturation, the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces peoples, together with their cultures,

87 Phan, *Mission and Catechesis,* 92-99; and Phan, *In Our Own Tongues*, 160-64.

88 Phan, *Mission and Catechesis*, 99-106.

89 Ibid., 66-68.

90 Pope Paul VI, *EN,* no. 20.

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> into her community. She transmits to them her own values, at the same time taking the good elements that already exist in them and renewing them from within. Through inculturation, the Church, for her part, becomes a more intelligible sign of what she is and a more effective instrument of mission.
>
> Thanks to this action within the local churches, the universal Church herself is enriched with a form of expression and values in the various sectors of Christian life such as evangelization, worship, theology and charitable works... Missionaries, who come from other churches and countries, must immerse themselves in the cultural milieu of those to whom they are sent, moving beyond their cultural limitations... It is not, of course, a matter of missionaries renouncing their own cultural identity, but of understanding, appreciating, fostering and evangelizing the culture of the environment in which they are working.[91]

For the Church in Asia, John Paul II emphasized both the connection and distinction between evangelization and inculturation:

> Evangelization and inculturation are naturally and intimately related to each other. The Gospel and evangelization are certainly not identical with culture; they are independent of it. Yet the Kingdom of God comes to people who are fundamentally linked to a culture, and the building of the Kingdom cannot avoid borrowing elements from human cultures.[92]
>
> As mentioned several times above, the FABC has considered inculturation as the central concern of the churches in Asia. Many of its documents highlight the importance and necessity of doing

91 Pope John Paul II, *RM*, nos. 52-52.

92 Pope John Paul II, *EA*, no. 21.

> prophetic dialogue with people of Asian cultures. In other words, prophetic dialogue with people of other cultures is a way for the Christian churches to become local churches: "True inculturation, far from being a tactic for the propagation of the faith, belongs to the very core of evangelization, for it is the continuation in time and space of the dialogue of salvation initiated by God and brought to a culmination when he uttered his Word in a very concrete historical situation."[93]

The relationship between popular piety and culture was supplied by the ITC and CDWDS. ITC, for instance, said: "Without any doubt whatsoever, popular piety can bring an irreplaceable contribution to a Christian cultural anthropology which would permit the reduction of the often tragic division between the faith of Christians and certain socio-economic institutions, of quite different orientation, which regulates their daily life."[94] On the other hand, CDWDS stated: "In genuine forms of popular piety, the Gospel message assimilates expressive forms particular to a given culture while also permeating the consciousness of that culture with the content of the Gospel, and its idea of life and death, and [human being's] freedom, mission and destiny."[95]

SM is undoubtedly a simple and excellent work of inculturation of de Rhodes in Vietnam. Looking at its form and content, one can assure that the Gospel message is genuinely performed in the Vietnamese culture. As Phan said, "popular religion will assume a greater role in inculturation as a more adequate understanding of this religious phenomenon is

93 Rosales and Arévalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 1: 94.

94 ITC, *Faith and Inculturation,* 1998. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1988_fede-inculturazione_en.html (accessed on November 24, 2016), no. 7.

95 CDWDS, *DPPL*, no. 63.

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gained."[96] This idea validates SM because it simultaneously indicates how to live the faith and the local culture.

Standing Meditation and Prophetic Dialogue with Non-Christians

Dialogue with non-Christians or people of other religions is the last of the three great and urgent concerns of the universal Church and the local Church in Vietnam—for the majority of the Vietnamese are "believers."[97] They believe in and worship *Ông Trời* (the Heavenese Religion), and venerate their ancestors (*Đạo Ông Bà/Filial Religion*). In this context, we understand "dialogue with Non-Christians" as "dialogue with people of other religions."[98]

Inter-religious dialogue is a significant challenge to evangelization in Vietnam. It is an activity that is carried out and lived by the people. In this manner, inter-religious dialogue "does not occur between religions but between and among believers of the different religions... [It] is done by people who have faith, who are adherents of a 'system' of belief and

96 Phan, *In Our Own Tongues*, xii.

97 According to official statistics of the Vietnamese government, aside from the Indigenous religion and three traditional religions (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism) from China, there are many other religions such Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Hoahaoism, Caodaism, Islam… There are around 24 million people identified with one of the recognized organized religions, out of 93,421,835.00 million of population. Of these, 81.69.3 percent are Non-Religions, 7.93 percent are Buddhists, 6.62 percent are Catholics, 0.86 percent are Protestants, 1.67 percent are Hoahaoists, 1.01 percent are Caodaists, and 0.22 percent are others. Meanwhile, Pew Research Center has a different survey from the government: 45.3 percent are Indigenous Believers, 16.4 percent are Buddhists, 8.2 percent are Christians, 29.6 percent are Non-Religions, and 0.5 percent are others (from https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tôn_giáo_tại_Việt_Nam (accessed on November 28, 2016)).

98 Pope John Paul II, *RM*, no. 55.

who identify themselves as belonging to a faith tradition or religion."[99]

John Paul II was the first pope who discussed inter-religious dialogue in *RM*.[100] He understood inter-religious in a broader meaning. According to him, inter-religious dialogue is "understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment, [it] is not in opposition to the mission *ad gentes*; indeed, it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions. This mission, in fact, is addressed to those who do not know Christ and his Gospel, and who belong for the most part to other religions." [101] Especially, he noticed "that salvation comes from Christ, and that dialogue does not dispense from evangelization... The Church sees no conflict between proclaiming Christ and engaging in inter-religious dialogue..." [102]

Six months later, the PCID and the CEP issued "Dialogue and Proclamation" in which inter-religious dialogue is understood more deeply. [103] More importantly, it offered four forms of dialogue to evangelization:

a) The dialogue of life, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.

b) The dialogue of action, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.

99 John Christian U. Young, "Popular Religiosity and the Dialogue with Islam: A Theological Schema," *Missio Inter Gentes* 2, no.1 (January, 2016): 34-35.

100 Pope John Paul II, RM, nos. 55-57.

101 Ibid., no. 55.

102 Ibid., no. 55.

103 PCID, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, no. 77.

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c) The dialogue of theological exchange, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages and to appreciate each other's spiritual values.

d) The dialogue of religious experience, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.[104]

Given the nature of SM as a popular Catholic devotion, the dialogue of theological exchange cannot be an approach of the prophetic dialogue because SM does not seek a deep understanding of the intellect. It simply manifests "a certain thirst for God" of the poor and the simple. However, the three other forms of dialogue can be observed in SM because it is where convergences and commonalities between faith traditions are apparent. This is especially true in the context of Vietnamese faith traditions.

Pope Francis mentions that interreligious dialogue must be open and respectful. It is a process of both giving and receiving. It would not be a dialogue when one party only gives to the other party, or one party only receives from the other party:

> [Through inter-religious dialogue,] we learn to accept others and their different ways of living, thinking, and speaking. We can then join one another in taking up the duty of serving justice and peace, which should become a basic principle of all our exchanges. A dialogue that seeks social peace and justice is in itself, beyond all merely practical considerations, an ethical commitment that brings about a new social situation. Efforts made in dealing

104 Ibid., no. 42.

> with a specific theme can become a process in which, by mutual listening, both parts can be purified and enriched. These efforts, therefore, can also express love for truth.[105]

Similarly, theologians such as Jacques Dupuis, Michael Amaladoss, Edgar G. Javier, and Peter C. Phan also agree that dialogue with people of other religions should be a process of both "giving" and "receiving," "speaking" and "listening," and "enriching" and "purifying" of partners. For instance, Dupuis wrote:

> Christians have something to gain from the dialogue. They will drive a twofold, combined advantage. On the one hand, they will win an enrichment of their own faith. Through the experience and testimony of the other, they will be able to discover at greater depth certain aspects, certain dimensions, of the Divine Mystery that they had perceived less clearly and that has been communicated less clearly by Christian tradition. At the same time, they will gain a purification of their faith. The shock of the encounter will often raise questions, force Christians to revise gratuitous assumptions, destroy deep-rooted prejudices or overthrow certain narrow conceptions or outlooks.[106]

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam (CBCV) has expressed its concern for the task of inter-religious dialogue to evangelization. It is aware that the Vietnamese Catholic Church needs to accompany the local peoples in "living the Gospel message in the reality of the society."[107] This is considered the evangelical orientation of the Church

105 Pope Francis, *EG*, no. 250.

106 Jacques Dupuis, SJ, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, New York: Obis Books, 1997), 382.

107 CBCV, "Pastoral Letter 1980," http://hdgmvietnam.org/giao-hoi-cong-giao-viet-nam-va-no-luc-truyen-giao-50-nam-qua-3/2388.63.8.aspx (accessed on September 28, 2016).

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in Vietnam since the 1980s. The CBCV issues pastoral letters as missionary directions expressing concern with people of other religions by living in solidarity with, respecting, and loving them as a part of doing mission.[108]

Focusing on SM as a *locus* where inter-religious prophetic dialogue occurs, it can be said that it is a place where all people can meet one another. Hence, the three forms of dialogue offered by the PCID are fit for SM. It is a place where the dialogue of life occurs for the participants, so they can "live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations."[109] When they live together in harmony, they can "collaborate for the integral development and liberation of the people."[110] They can enrich and purify the faith of one another because all are rooted in the Vietnamese culture.

Conclusion

SM is as a *locus theologicus* against which we portray various images of Jesus and draw a popular Christian spirituality that is significant and relevant to the Vietnamese people. This is called "faith seeking understanding." However, SM is also a resource of theology in Vietnam for doing "faith seeking expression."

John Paul II has said: "Evangelization is a matter of faith, an accurate indicator of our faith in Christ and his love."[111] This means that faith must be expressed in concrete missionary activities. Through missionary expressions, one shows

108 CBCV, "Pastoral Letter 2015," http://hdgmvietnam.org/hoi-dong-giam-muc-viet-nam-ket-thuc-hoi-nghi-thuong-nien-ky-ii-2015/7299.63.8.aspx (accessed on September 28, 2016), no.3.

109 PCID, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, no. 77.

110 Ibid.

111 Pope John Paul II, *RM*, no. 11.

how he/she accepts, internalizes, and lives his/her Christian faith.

In this manner, SM is a precious approach or tool for proclaiming the Good News. By practicing SM, the Vietnamese people express their cultural way of accepting, internalizing, and living their Christian faith. SM is a very good expression through which the seed of the Gospel takes root in the Vietnamese culture. Furthermore, SM is a place where prophetic dialogue can be done as an approach for missionary evangelization.

In sum, SM is a precious instrument of evangelization that can be used to express God's mercy in today's Vietnamese society. Mercy is God's first action of mission, and "Christ is the 'eternal Gospel' (Rev. 14: 6); He 'is the same yesterday and today and forever (Heb. 13: 8),' yet his riches and beauty are inexhaustible."[112]

112 Pope Francis, *EG*, no. 11.

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