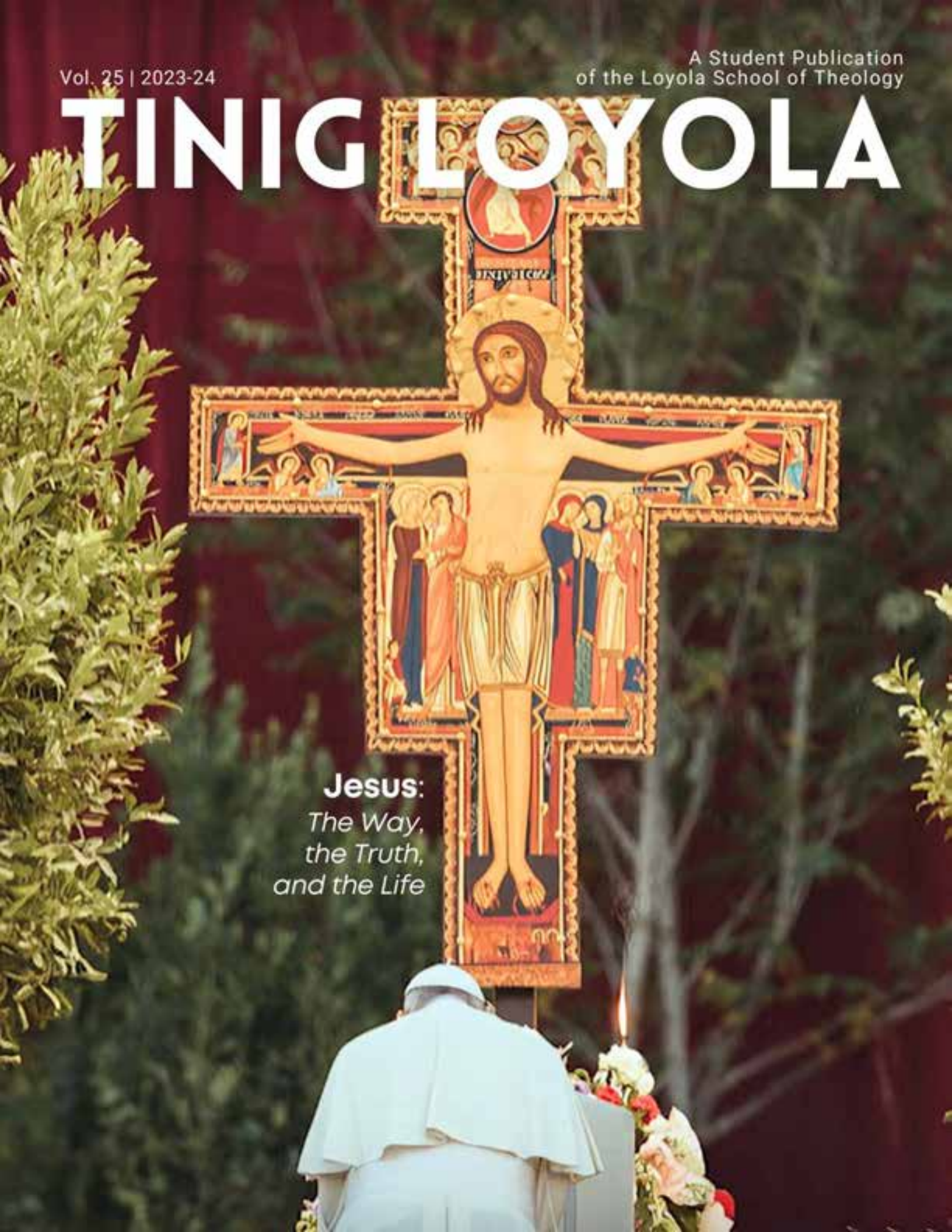
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TINIG LOYOLA



Jesus:
The Way,
the Truth,
and the Life

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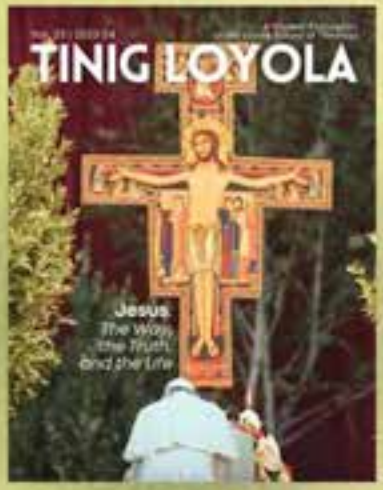
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Jesus: The Way, the Truth, and the Life

ABOUT THE COVER



We are grateful to Dr. Christina Kheng, one of the facilitators-experts at the Global Synod Assembly in October 2023, for sharing with us photos during the Spirit-filled gathering. On the cover is Pope Francis standing before a *Taizé* cross at an Ecumenical Prayer Vigil that was held before the Synod officially began. The Holy Father began his vigil homily thus: "'Together.' Like the early Christian community on the Day of Pentecost. Like one flock, loved and gathered by one Shepherd, Jesus." This Jesus is the Way and the Truth and the Life.

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ABOUT THE ISSUE

Deduction is the common way of brainstorming for a publication peg. The Editorial Team begins by selecting a theme for the issue, and then identifies articles that can substantiate the selected theme. This year's issue is a fruit of the reverse. Our brainstorming sessions led us first to surfacing different topics we thought compelling, and then we started sensing threads that could bring them into unity. We employed induction.

The Spirit inspired us to classify the topics in the light of Jesus' declaration in the Gospel of John, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (14:6a). Thus, we have organized all the articles in this issue into "Jesus: The Way," "Jesus: The Truth," and "Jesus: The Life." Note that these three divisions are a tool for organization. They must not limit the breadth of the articles' contents and the possibility of touching on all three aspects. Moreover, the articles in this issue – like in the past issues – are primarily meant to explore the theme and not to exhaust it. We desire that they encourage the readers to embrace that which awaits further reception and articulation.

What is it to us for Jesus to be the way and the truth and the life?

We begin the way by establishing context, which the article on polarization attempts to accomplish. Then we recover the ways of the indigenous and the young, what we can consider as primordial. In doing so, we find strength to move forward together as one synodal Church, together with the Vicar of Christ, Pope Francis himself, who gratefully celebrated ten years of his papacy last year.

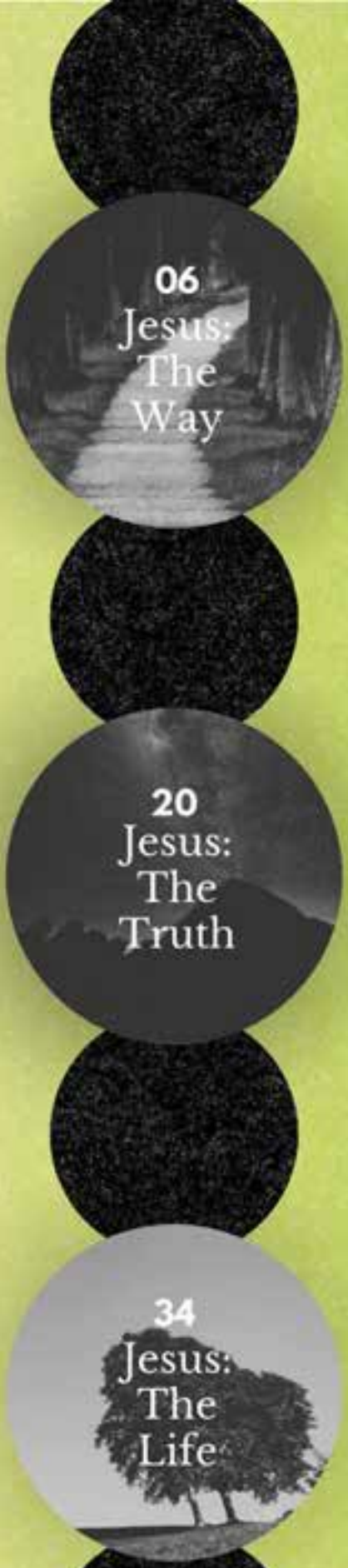
We listen to the speaking of truth that goes intimately with hope as the sacrament of healing a world confronted with brokenness and what the Jesuit General Congregation 35 called "a tantalizing culture of images." This includes the rise of generative artificial intelligence, which has been affecting ministries and relationships. It profits us, then, to step back and examine ourselves in the light of the truth of our being beloved children of God and the mission it entails.



We celebrate the gift of life and our choice to devote ourselves in love and service. Stories of consecration fill the final section of this issue, testifying to the fullness that springs forth from emptying oneself in Christ. We are sent to proclaim this fullness of life in Christ, especially to those that even the Church has discriminated against through the years. It is in this context the declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* is life-giving.

In this issue's pages, let us adore Jesus, our Way, our Truth, and our Life.

SCH. ROGELIO R. NATO, JR., S.J.
CHIEF EDITOR



ACADEMIC UPDATES

LST launches basic English proficiency program

In a bid to enhance language skills among religious, priests, and lay foreign students, the Loyola School of Theology (LST) launched its Basic English Proficiency Program in January 2024. Providing participants with the necessary linguistic tools to engage effectively in academic and everyday contexts, the program consists of two courses: TMP 295.93 "Introduction to Reading and Listening in English" and TMP 295.94 "Introduction to Writing and Speaking in English." The courses cater to different proficiency levels, from beginner to high intermediate.

LST crafts blended weekend MA in Theological Studies track

Beginning the Intersession Term in June-July 2024, LST will resume its pre-pandemic Saturday classes for the Master of Arts in Theological Studies program… with a twist!

The program will offer online Saturday classes conducted through Zoom, providing working professionals with the opportunity to pursue their master's degree without compromising their professional commitments or their pursuit of academic excellence. The blended weekend master's program lets students convene with fellow students at LST and the Ateneo de Manila University (ADMU) campus.

LST offers theology courses in Chinese and Korean as part of the Theology in an Asian Language Series

The course offered for the first semester from August to December 2023 is *Theology of Sino-Christian Life* by Fr. Fang Hua, which is a contextual theology of Christian life which emerges from the process of inculturation of the Sinological concept of *ren* in the Gospel's message of God's love. The course offered for the second semester from January to May 2024 is *The Martyrs of Korea – A Historical Rethinking of their Spirituality* by Fr. Joseph Kang Suk-Jin, BMC. The course first clarifies the reality of martyrdom in general and then focuses on the dedication and the practice of Christianity under harsh and vicious oppression, especially the martyrs of Korea. Afterwards, it presents certain orientations for the contemporary practice of virtues in Catholicism today.



LST and the Theology Department propel ADMU to emerge as one of the world's top universities

ADMU, through its Department of Theology and the LST Theology and Ministry Program of the School of Humanities, was named one of the world's top universities for the study of Theology, Divinity & Religious Studies, where it ranked between 101 and 140 among over 1,500 universities around the world. This was the first year that ADMU was ranked in this field, and it is the only university in the Philippines that made it to the list. It is also the only Jesuit University in Asia, Africa, and Oceania that made it to the top 140. This recognition was accorded by the global higher education analyst QS Quacquarelli Symonds in its 2024 edition of its QS World University Rankings by Subject.



LST EVENTS

AUG. 30, 2023

MASS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Students, faculty, staff, and friends of LST attended the traditional Mass of the Holy Spirit inaugurating the Academic Year 2023-2024 on August 30 at 10:30 a.m. at the Oratory of St. Ignatius of Loyola. Fr. Eusebio, Jr., S.J. was presider, while Fr. Jerome Vallabaraj, S.D.B., visiting professor of Youth Ministry, gave the homily.

During the Mass, the LST faculty renewed their Profession of Faith and Oath of Fidelity and the newly elected Executive Board of the Student Council was installed to their respective offices. The Mass was followed with a welcome party.



SEPT. 20, 2023

SEASON OF CREATION PARALITURGY

On Sept. 20, 2023, a Season of Creation paraliturgy was held at Cardinal Sin Center at 10:30 a.m. The Season emphasized God's role as the Creator of the vast universe, God's presence in creation, and our duty to safeguard and nurture God's creation in the face of pressing environmental crises, including biodiversity loss, climate change, violent storms, droughts, and more. The 2023 ecumenical theme, "Let Justice and Peace Flow" called to confront the injustices and violence driving these ecological crises and offers hope that collective efforts for justice and peace can rejuvenate our shared home.



SEPT. 4, 2023

LST – ST. AUGUSTINE'S SEMINARY OF TORONTO COLLABORATION

On Sept. 4, 2023, LST President Fr. Enrico Eusebio, Jr., S.J., Vice President for Academic Affairs Fr. Rogel Abais, S.J., and Executive Secretary Fr. Oliver Dy, S.J. met with Filipino-Canadian Fr. John Abad, the Dean of the Pontifical Faculty of Theology at St. Augustine's Seminary in Toronto, Canada to explore areas of collaboration between the two institutions. The administrators discussed the mechanics of an online cross-enrollment program starting the second semester (January-May 2024) of the current academic year.

SEPT. 11-15, 2023

LST AT THE FABC CONSULTATION ON SYNODALITY IN FORMATION

Fr. Eusebio, Jr., S.J., Fr. Abais, S.J., and Fr. Hartono Budi, S.J., associate professor of Systematic Theology represented LST at the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences' (FABC) First Consultation Meeting on Synodal Formation in Asia in Pattaya, Thailand from Sept. 11-15, 2023. The consultation meeting was a joint effort of the following FABC Offices: Office of the Laity and Family, Office of Consecrated Life, Office of Education and Faith Formation, and Office of Theological Concerns.

DEC. 12, 2023

LST NIGHT, LST CHRISTMAS PARTY AT THE CARDONER GARDEN



FEB. 5, 2024

LST PRESIDENT'S DAY AND SPORTSFEST AT THE ATENEO COLLEGE COVERED COURTS



MAR. 12, 2024

BLOOD-LETTING: DUGONG ALAY, DUGTONG BUHAY

Organized by LST and the Loyola House of Studies (LHS) Health Team, in partnership with the Philippine General Hospital (PGH) Chaplaincy, the annual blood donation drive was held at the LHS lobby to benefit PGH's charity patients. This year's donation drive collected close to 70 bags of blood.



MAR. 28-30, 2024

LST HOLY WEEK PASCHAL TRIDUUM RECOLLECTION

Dr. Joaquin Yap, Jr., of the Servants of the Word, a professor of Systematic Theology at LST, gave a Holy Week Triduum Recollection titled "Meeting Mercy: Three Anonymous Women in Mark's Gospel" at Jaime Cardinal Sin Center.



FEB. 13-14, 2024

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE THEOLOGY OF THE PRIESTHOOD

LST students and faculty joined the two-day International Conference on the Theology of the Priesthood held at the Frassati Auditorium of the Pontifical and Royal University of Santo Tomas on Feb. 13-14, 2024.



APR. 4-6, 2024

LST HOSTS THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON YOUTH MINISTRY 2024

LST, in cooperation with the Don Bosco School of Theology, hosted the second International Conference on Youth Ministry on Apr. 4-6, 2024 at the Henry Lee Irwin Theater of the ADMU Grade School and at LST. ICYM 2024's theme is "Youth Ministry: Towards Fullness of Life for All." Delving into the principles, vision, and best practices of youth ministry within the context of Pope Francis' message as expressed in his 2019 post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Christus Vivit*, the conference sought to address the evolving landscape of youth ministry, acknowledging the changes in our social and cultural environment.



THEOLOGICAL HOUR



OCT. 18, 2023

Safeguarding Minors and Vulnerable Adults in a Wounded Church

Dr. Gabriel S. Dy-Liacco



NOV. 08, 2023

The Relevance of Indigenous Wisdom from the Margins for Theology Today

Having immersed himself and become enriched by the "sacred meaning" in understanding indigenous symbols and myths (QA §79), Fr. Jojo M. Fung, S.J. attempts to articulate the discerning correlation between indigenous cultures and theology regarding the shamans and the "various beings" (QA§42) of indigenous mysticism (QA§73) in his works, *Shamanic Theology of Sacred Sustainability* (2014), *A Shamanic Pneumatology in a Mystical Age of Sacred Sustainability* (2017), *Creation is Sacred & Spirited* (2017) and *A Sacred Sojourn with the Spirit of Wisdom* (2023).



JAN. 31, 2024

The Synod on Synodality: Will It Change the Church?

Dr. Christina Kheng

While some people say there is no turning back, others are hesitant about the changes that the Synod on Synodality might bring. What, then, is this all about? How does it affect those involved in formation?



MAR. 13, 2024

Bahala Na: In Search of an "Ordinary Theology" for the Filipino Diaspora

In the contemporary theological landscape, Filipino theology has remained marginal compared to Latin-American theologies. Believing that the input of Filipino migrants in the current theological enterprise matters, too, Fr. Rowan L. Rebustillo, S.T.D., Ph.D. presented *Bahala Na* as a Filipino articulation of Astley's Ordinary Theology in the context of the Filipino diaspora.


Jesus:
The
Way



We begin the ***way*** by establishing context, which the article on polarization attempts to accomplish. Then we recover the ways of the indigenous and the young, what we can consider as primordial. In doing so, we find strength to move forward together as one synodal Church, together with the Vicar of Christ, Pope Francis himself, who gratefully celebrated ten years of his papacy last year.

The Synodal Way: Antidote to Polarization

By Sch. Kevin Stephon R. Centeno, S.J.



One of the biggest fears in the ongoing Synod on Synodality initiated by Pope Francis is the worsening of polarization in the Catholic Church. In a Church already wounded by divisions, the synodal process has the potential to worsen the tensions between those who are critical of Pope Francis' pastorality in doctrine and those who zealously support the Pope's ecclesiological vision. To apply labels, which the Pope does not really like, the tensions might worsen between the "conservatives" and the "liberals," although how these labels are classified are not always clear-cut. The use of labels which carry political overtones can implicitly contribute to polarization, e.g., right and left, traditionalist and progressive, conservative and liberal. I myself am guilty of using these labels sometimes.

In an ecumenical prayer vigil before the start of the synod retreat in preparation for the 16 thOrdinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops – Synod on Synodality, the Pope in his message hoped "that the Synod be a *kairós* of fraternity, a place where the Holy Spirit will purify the Church from gossip, ideologies, and polarization." The Pope himself is no stranger to gossip, ideologies, and polarization. He has been perceived as a polarizing figure in the Church because of the ambiguity of his positions. He has been a victim of malicious gossip. He has been accused of embracing Marxist ideology and the progressive agenda. His fellow Jesuit, the theologian Victor Codina, captures in "Why do some Catholics oppose Pope Francis?" the fundamental reason for the strong resistance to his papacy: "The opposition to Francis is opposition to the Second Vatican Council and to the evangelical reform of the Church that Pope John XXIII wanted to promote." Against all odds, he courageously pushed for the implementation of the Second Vatican Council. Thankfully, the opposition cannot force him to backtrack the ecclesial reforms and pastoral conversion he unleashed.

Contrary to the fear of further polarizing the Church, one of the aims of the synod in synodality is to inspire the faithful to walk together, to listen to and to learn from each other regardless of one's views and inclinations. A synodal Church is a Church humble enough to allow dialogue to exist within the spectrum of the people of God. The goal is never to eliminate diversity of views and opinions, even diversity of personality; diversity gives life to a community. Commenting on the reality of tensions in the Church, the Pope

says in *Let Us Dream*: "Our main task, however, is not to disengage from polarization but to engage with conflict and disagreement in ways that prevent us from descending into polarization. This means resolving division by allowing for new thinking that can transcend that division." This "new thinking" requires the spirit of synodality. Take note that the synod on synodality is more focused on the process than the outcome. The starting point is the "synodalization" of the entire Church, then everything else follows.

Before his appointment as the prefect for the Dicastery of the Doctrine of the Faith and receiving the red hat, the Argentinian theologian Víctor Manuel Fernández, who is a close theological advisor to Pope Francis, penned an essay on the word "encounter" and how significant this is to Pope Francis in an anthology entitled *A Pope Francis Lexicon*. His essay sheds light on the Pope's promotion of "the culture of encounter." In his words and deeds, the spirit of encounter is manifested. He shuns confrontational discourses by allowing disagreements and debates and envisions a polyhedron Church and society "where different people can live together, complement each other, and illuminate each other." Sounds like synodality!

Formed as a Jesuit, "Francis insists that it is not healthy to flee from conflicts or to ignore them... From two different things can come a synthesis that is better than and improves upon both, although both also have to renounce something." Tensions can be life-giving. Instead of resorting to labeling and to condemning, the better way is to recognize the differences of the other with respect, tolerance, and openness. Underlying this attitude of genuine encounter is appreciating the great worth of a human being beyond what defines him or her. "Only when we recognize this is true encounter possible, and in this way, working together, we can build bit-by-bit that precious polyhedron made of many facets." The culture of encounter is intertwined with synodality.



Photo courtesy of Dr. Christina Kheng.

The synodal Church is an antidote to polarization. As a pilgrim Church, the Church grows in her understanding of the divine Mystery. A too rigid and ideological stance can hinder the journey together towards the truth. Amidst the diversity in the Church, the Spirit is empowering us to preserve the unity which God, our Father and Mother, wills. May we ask the Holy Spirit to come and open our hearts to each other:

> *"Today, if we listen to the Spirit, we will not be concerned with conservatives and progressives, traditionalists and innovators, right and left. When those become our criteria, then the Church has forgotten the Spirit. The Paraclete impels us to unity, to concord, to the harmony of diversity. He makes us see ourselves as parts of the same body, brothers and sisters of one another. Let us look to the whole! The enemy wants diversity to become opposition and so he makes them become ideologies. Say no to ideologies, yes to the whole." (from Pope Francis' homily on Pentecost Sunday, May 23, 2021)*

Kevin Stephon R. Centeno, S.J. is a Jesuit scholastic of the Philippine Province of the Society of Jesus. He pronounced his perpetual first vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience on August 2, 2023 at the Oratory of the Sacred Heart in Novaliches, Quezon City.

The Way of Indigenous Wisdom

By Fr. Jojo M. Fung, S.J.



"Nature is not for sale. Nature is sacred. Nature is a part of us. We are a part of nature,"

Garing bin Muntalan, a renowned Murut Shaman from Sabah, East Malaysia, has staunchly advocated. Taking up the indigenous wisdom of the 2023 *Documento con aportes al Sínodo de la Diócesis de San José del Guaviare y de la Arquidiócesis de Villavicencio y Granada* (Columbia), *Querida Amazonia* stated: "We are water, air, earth, and life of the environment created by God. For this reason, we demand an end to the mistreatment and destruction of mother Earth. The land has blood, and it is bleeding; the multinationals have cut the veins of our mother Earth" (QA§42). Such indigenous wisdom articulates with *Laudato Si'* (LS) and *Laudate Deum* (LD) which explain that "nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it" (LS§139) and thus, "human life, intelligence, and freedom are elements of the nature that enriche our planet, part of its internal workings and its equilibrium" (LD §26).

Furthermore, indigenous wisdom avers that nature is sacred because it is spirited. The Wolaita community of Southern Ethiopia believes that the Creator, known as *Saluwa Tossa* (sky God) is present to *alame* (world) not as the *medhaga* (Eternal creator) but as spirit known as *ayana* (spirit). This *ayana* is in communion with the Wolaita ancestors and known to be animating the animals, the forests, the mountains, the plants, the trees, the water, and our *alame*. For the Urãon Adivasis of Chotanagpur of India, *Dharmes* is the Upholder-Sustainer-God who is ever present at all times and everywhere, in the ancestral homeland, community, nature, and the earth/creation. The belief in *naad* (spirit, soul, energy, and vibration) present in the human and natural world such as *bar-pahri* (spirits of 12 mountains), *erapa-naad* (family spirits for protection and guidance), *shikariyo* (hunting spirit) and *gorya* (cattle protector) motivate them to live in harmony with nature and hold mother earth in reverence.

The indwelling presence of the plural spirits finds resonance in Teilhard de Chardin (1969, 93), a Jesuit paleontologist who exhorted the scientific community to examine "the phenomenon of spirit [as] We are coincidental with it. We feel it within. It is the very

Cited work in this page: Michael Kujur, *Urãon Sarnskriti*, 172-190.

thread of which the other phenomena are woven for us. It is the thing we know best in the world since we are itself, and it is for us everything."

Contemporary community of astrophysics (Schrijver 2015) has looped us back to the wonders of the spirit's cosmic actions in creation when they discovered that the minutest particles (nutrinos, fermions, quarks, photino, bosons, gluons, wino and zino) in the cosmos have "a preferred sense of direction" (Lombardo 2006; Stewart 2000) and "a kind of homing instinct (Simon Conway Morris 2003, 8, 20) engaging in processes of complexification and self-organization.

Our Christian faith alerts us that God is Spirit (John 4:24) or *Rûah Elohim* who "represents the presence of God, which is throughout the whole creation (Ps 139:7), and the mighty involvement of God in earthly affairs (Is 63:10-14; Job 26:12-13)." Hence, *Rûah Elohim* "gives life (2 Cor 3:6) and is represented by the elements necessary for life: air, fire, and water." Since *Rûah Elohim* is everywhere and indwells in all matters/things created, we can analogously attribute such "preferred sense of direction" and homing instinct" to the activities of *Rûah Elohim* indwelling in all the particles of our cosmos. Spirit-indwelling in all the particles of planet Earth is indeed a Chardinian "phenomenon of spirit" already advocated by indigenous mysticism (QA §73) which regards nature as spirited, imbued with sacredness due to God's Spirit-indwelling.

The indigenous wisdom that nature is sacred and spirited by the plural beings has been rightfully acknowledged in *Querida Amazonia* with its reference to the "various beings" (QA §42). Therefore, existence in the cosmos, as Grim opined (1994, 48-49), is imbued with "spiritual powers"' which sustain the earth and the cosmos to the extent that creation is "enspirited or divine," according to J. B. Callicot (1989, 23).

Fr. Jojo M. Fung, S.J. is a board member of the Sacred Springs: Dialogue Institute of Spirituality and Sustainability and a member of Laudato Si' Asia-Coalition of Culture of Care, Resilience and Ecological Justice on partnership with Asian Sacred Wisdom. He is an associate professor of Systematic Theology at the Loyola School of Theology, Manila. His most recent E-version of his September 21, 2023 book is entitled *A Sacred Sojourn with the Spirit of Wisdom in the Era of Pneuma-Saptientolocen*.

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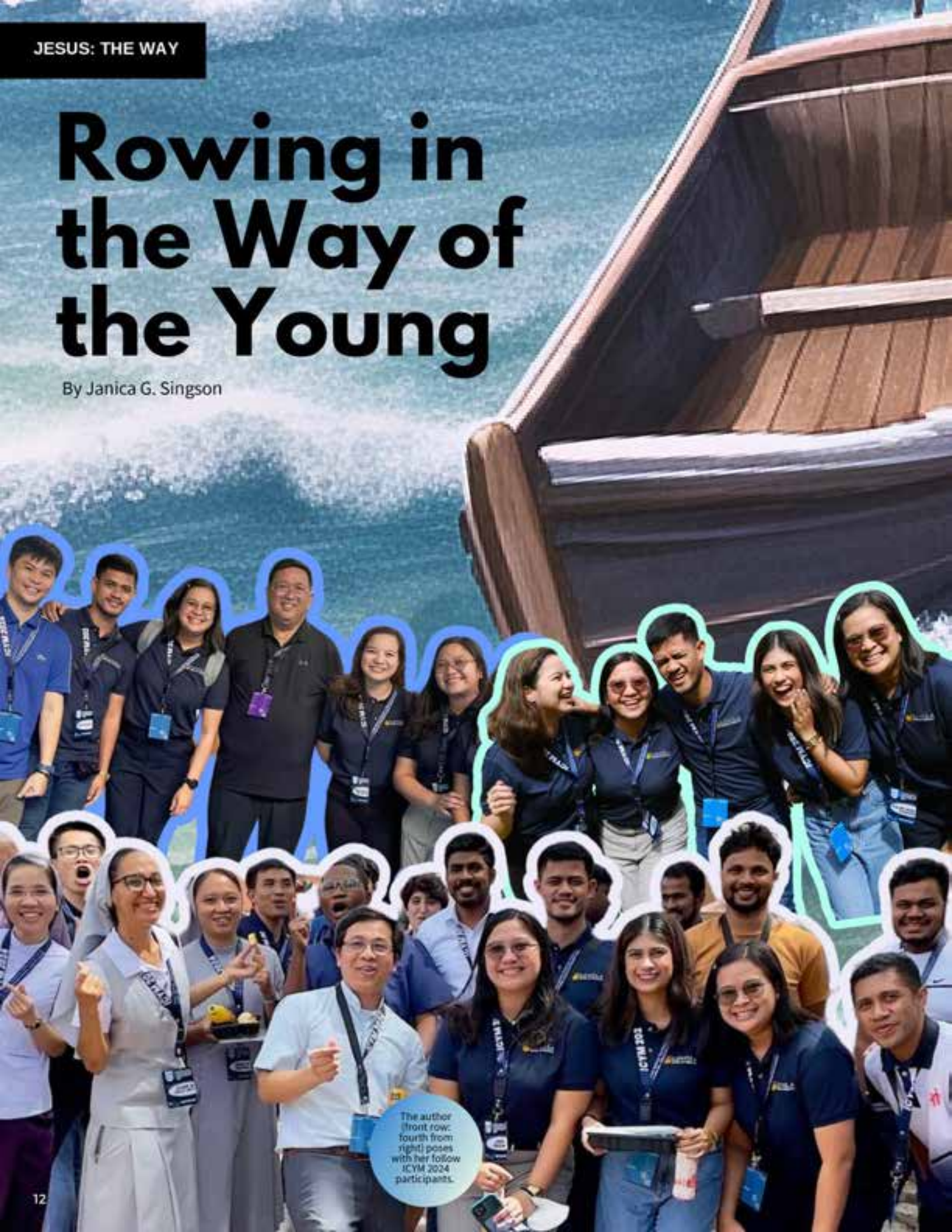
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Pope Francis' photo with Jose Gregorio Diaz Mirabal, a member of the Curripaco indigenous community, is courtesy of Vatican Media.

Rowing in the Way of the Young

By Janica G. Singson



The author (front row, fourth from right) poses with her fellow ICYM 2024 participants.

The International Conference on Youth Ministry (ICYM) 2024 is one of the events this year that I looked forward to attending. Organized by the Loyola School of Theology, in cooperation with the Don Bosco School of Theology, ICYM 2024 brought together over 700 participants from Asia and Europe, a testament to God's love for young people.

As the conference drew near, I found myself filled with joy and anticipation. The idea of engaging myself in a group of like-minded people committed to youth empowerment sparked my interest and excitement. I was hopeful to gain meaningful learning experiences and beneficial networking possibilities. I expectantly counted the days before the conference. But even amidst the excitement, I could not help but feel nervous and uncertain. I was not sure how to handle the conference well because of the number of workshops, sessions, and networking opportunities. I dreaded the amount of knowledge and conversations that awaited me, especially with the presence of seasoned professionals.

My initial concerns and anxieties began growing as I entered the Henry Lee Irwin Theatre. I could not help but feel intimidated by people whose expertise and experience seemed daunting. Will my voice be heard over a sea of experienced experts and practitioners? There were also ministers from countries other than the Philippines! What about actively participating in talks and workshops? Will I be able to add meaningfully to the conversation, or will I struggle to keep up with the scope of knowledge being shared?

As the conference days passed, I found myself being transformed by unforeseen lessons and insightful encounters. The keynote speeches, as well as the thought-provoking workshops pushed me to broaden my perspective and reconsider my approaches to youth ministry. The breakout sessions were particularly enriching. On the first day, I attended sessions on retreats and recollections led by Ms. Lesly Ann Rosal. Her shared experiences provided valuable insights that I can apply not just as a youth leader but as a campus minister of the school where I am working as well. On the second day, I attended the session of Fr. Francis Alvarez, S.J., focusing on creative approaches to Bible study. I would never see the verses of the Bible the same way again, as he emphasized the importance of opening our eyes to details and understanding deeply what God's words are trying to tell us.

> This ... was a striking reminder of the universal nature of the difficulties that young people face today. We were after all in the same boat that was rowing its way through the seas and rivers of youth accompaniment.

Speaking with fellow participants and listening to their perspectives during the open forums, I began to realize that while we came from different backgrounds and had various experiences, we were nonetheless facing similar struggles and eyeing similar goals. This sense of harmony was a striking reminder of the universal nature of the difficulties that young people face today. We were after all in the same boat that was rowing its way through the seas and rivers of youth accompaniment.

As I contemplate the impact of ICYM 2024, I am moved with a profound sense of gratitude for the opportunities it has provided to me and my fellow participants. The conference served as an outlet for personal development and learning, pushing me outside of my comfort zone and broadening my horizons. Moving forward, I am excited to use the newfound information and ideas gained from the conference in my practice of youth ministry in the parish. Whether through creative programs, collaborative projects, or community partnerships, I am geared to making use of my experiences at ICYM 2024 to make a significant difference in the lives of our young people. *Ad majorem Dei gloriam!*

Nica Singson is the parish youth secretary of the Metropolitan Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception of the Archdiocese of Zamboanga. She is also a campus ministry officer in the Ateneo de Zamboanga University Junior High School.

Seeking the Way Forward Together

By Dr. Christina Kheng







When I was a student of theology, my very first experience of pouring over detailed accounts of the Second Vatican Council was both exhilarating and fascinating. The characters, speeches, actions, and decisions all came to life for me as I mentally reconstructed this momentous occasion of church history.

Now that I have been part of several gatherings of the Synod on Synodality 2021-2024 at the local, continental, and global level, I would say to students of theology today that just as it was the case for Vatican II, these gatherings are significant not only for the issues that are discussed and the decisions that are made, but also for the way participants learn how to be church together through the whole process.

I have often highlighted in my talks and articles about the Synod on Synodality that "the method is the message." This phrase rang even more vividly at the first session of the Global Synod Assembly in October 2023. More than 400 people including voting members, special guests, experts, and staff were gathered in Rome for four intensive weeks. I was there as a non-voting expert to facilitate the Conversations in the Spirit for the participants.

Many aspects about the assembly were novel – from the presence of non-bishop voting members including more than 50 women and many lay people, to small group conversations and roundtable seating at which persons from diverse ecclesial ranks, cultures, and traditions interacted with each other. With the events of Vatican II never far from my mind, one of the most notable features for me about the October 2023 Synod Assembly was the fact that it began not with fully-drafted texts for mere fine-tuning and rubber-stamping—as was the case in Vatican II initially—but with a list of open-ended questions for which the Holy Spirit's guidance was to be discerned communally.

I thought to myself: finally, we are seeking, trusting, and making room for the Lord to speak through the assembly! In line with this objective, the assembly program included a retreat as well as

frequent times of prayer and communal liturgies, Scriptural and theological reflections, moments of silence, sharing, and a lot of listening to each other. Thus, the aula of the synod hall was transformed into a sacred space of encounter, listening, learning, and even conversion.

As a facilitator, it was very edifying and humbling to see how dedicated and passionate the participants were, and how they truly endeavoured to listen deeply to each other, trying their best to understand and welcome especially those points of view which were different. I was especially inspired by those participants who went out of their way to get to know persons who had different perspectives from them. In this diverse gathering, there was a prevalent and fruitful curiosity about the "other." Of course, not all participants had the same extent of engagement, and opposing perspectives emerged more sharply as the discussions progressed in detail and honesty.

Nevertheless, there was an overall willingness and openness to engage authentically in the process, to welcome contrasting viewpoints, and to seek the way forward together. It helped that the synod program enabled people to interact with each other in both formal and informal settings. One of the greatest fruits of the meeting was that over four weeks of hard work and many conversations and cappuccinos, people who were hitherto known to one another only as faceless statistics in the ecclesial landscape became not just fellow assembly members but friends in the Lord. I could see that God was working on something new, helping us to welcome each other as members of the same family, and to acknowledge that with our wide diversity of contexts and points of view, we were on the same journey together in seeking to continue Christ's mission in the world. I believe this is an essential starting point for communal discernment.

Many participants said that the method of Conversations in the Spirit made a big difference in the Synod Assembly. Indeed, it provided a structure in which everyone's voice and perspective could be



heard and all the sharing reflected upon collectively in order to identify the resonances, divergences, questions, and possible ways forward. With the help of a facilitator, the method enabled everyone to participate in deliberating and shaping the proposal of the group.

Moreover, the conversations occurred in an atmosphere of prayerfulness, with inner attention to what the Holy Spirit might be gently prompting the group to see. The preparation by each participant in terms of praying and reflecting on the topic was crucial. Just as important was the disposition of hospitality, attentive listening, compassion, openness, eagerness to learn, honesty, patience, fidelity to the developing faith tradition, and trust in the Lord who leads.

Another major fruit of the meeting was the conviction expressed by not a few participants that the way of proceeding at the assembly was certainly something to foster back home in their local church and society. More than just the exterior processes, I think they were referring especially to the interior dispositions that were entailed because these are the very ones that make us a pilgrim community of Christ's disciples. Whatever the conflicts or questions we have to face, these dispositions of love, welcome, prayerful discernment, and commitment to the Gospel mission will help us walk along the right way.





Although the post-assembly synthesis report contains many principles and ideas for moving forward, it is the lived experience of the assembly maturing over the four weeks together that will bear fruit around the world. Amidst the fellowship, joys, tensions, and challenges, we were learning what it meant to be a synodal church. It helped that the assembly structure, with its dialogical and interactive format both inside and outside the synod hall, enabled a much closer encounter of participants with one another compared with previous synods. Hence, many of them said they really experienced the diversity of the Church in a poignant way.

Although this came with inevitable feelings of tension amidst differences, I could tell that at a deeper level, there was an underlying sense of pride and wonder at the amazing diversity of the Body of Christ. Through the eyes of faith, the assembly might be regarded as a spiritual event likened to a fountain of divine grace renewing the Church and flowing even to those who were not there. Hearing the reflections of a number of participants after the assembly, it is evident that something changed within them in a positive way, even if they each expressed it differently.

At this juncture, I feel it is important not to forget the local listening processes that occurred in the first phase of the Synod from late-2021 to mid-2022. Dubbed as the largest consultation exercise in the Church and possibly even in human history, Catholic communities from all continents, rites, and ecclesial structures were called upon to engage in the sharing, listening, and discerning on synodality. Thanks to the efforts of many local synod teams, a wide variety of people from the peripheries were reached out to, including those who lived in remote areas, those struggling with livelihood issues, those who have been neglected by society, and those who have felt estranged from the Church.

The heartfelt and joyful response of those who experienced being included and consulted for the first time expressed the *sensus fidei* about synodality much more than words could ever do. "The Church has made us feel that we matter" and "For the first time, our voice is being sought" were common refrains in the synod reports. Many of the participants said the process of dialoguing together has engendered a sense of co-responsibility and they hoped to continue this way of proceeding in the Church.

> "I could see that God was working on something new, helping us to welcome each other as members of the same family, and to acknowledge that with our wide diversity of contexts and points of view, we were on the same journey together in seeking to continue Christ's mission in the world.





All photos are courtesy of the author.



Synodal conversion takes time and requires structural and cultural changes that are not easy to undertake or sustain. However, what I've seen so far in the experiences of the Synod 2021-2024 comprises many things that we would not have imagined possible only a few years ago. I have no doubt that the Holy Spirit has been at work in the Church, and I pray we will all continue to walk together, listening and discerning the way forward one step at a time in God's enduring love.

Dr. Christina Kheng teaches synodality and pastoral leadership at the East Asian Pastoral Institute and at other on-going formation programs around the world. Besides being a facilitator at the Global Synod Assembly, she has been a member of the Methodology Commission for the Secretariat of the Synod since early-2021 and was part of the global team which prepared the Document for the Continental Stage in September 2022. She was also a speaker and moderator at the Asian Continental meeting in February 2023. Dr. Kheng shared about the Synod at the Loyola School of Theology's Theological Hour in January 2024.

On the Way with Pope Francis

By Fr. James H. Kroeger, M.M.



Our ten-year pilgrimage with Pope Francis (2013- 2023) has been an enriching experience. We have received several helpful signposts, guiding our pathway. A new invitation now lies before us to continue walking with Pope Francis, following the 2023-2024 synod. Six pivotal themes have surfaced during our rewarding decade-long journey.

Implementing the Second Vatican Council. Clearly Pope Francis has sought to bring the Council's vision of renewal to the heart of the Church. Celebrating the October 11, 2022 feast of Saint John XXIII, convoker of Vatican II, Francis said in his homily: "Let us return to the Council's pure sources of love. Let us rediscover the Council's passion and renew our own passion for the Council." The two popes of Vatican II saw it as a "contemporary Pentecost." John XXIII said: "O Holy Spirit, renew your wonders in this our day as by a new Pentecost." Pope Paul VI asserted: "The first need of the Church is always to live Pentecost."

Becoming a Missionary People. Repeatedly Pope Francis calls the entire Church to a new chapter of evangelization, inviting every Christian to a life of missionary discipleship. As those who have encountered Jesus, we are to share the joy of the Gospel and "go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the 'peripheries' in need of the light of the Gospel" (*Evangelii Gaudium* 20). Our mission as disciples of Christ Jesus "is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people" (EG 268). The joy of the Gospel is for all people; thus, we seek "to meet every challenge as a leaven of Gospel witness" (EG 75).

Caring for Our Common Home. Pope Francis is passionately concerned with environmental and ecological issues that profoundly affect the earth and all living beings. He has written two pivotal documents on this topic: *Laudato Sí* (2015) and *Laudate Deum* (2023). The reality of climate change is undoubtedly a key pillar of his papacy. Francis asserts: "The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth" (LS 21). "Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years" (LS 53). "A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal" (LS 202).

Living Merciful Lives. Pope Francis, often called the "pope of mercy," proclaimed an entire *year of mercy* in his 2015 *Misericordiae Vultus*, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the close of Vatican II (1965-2015). Francis says: "We need



constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace…. Mercy [is] the bridge that connects God and man" (MV 2). Our God is "rich in mercy" (Eph 2:4). "Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers" (MV 10). "The Church is commissioned to announce the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel…. Wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy" (MV 12). In a word, faith-filled existence means "living-in-mercy."

Seeking Authentic Holiness. A constant theme permeating the thought of Pope Francis is the call to holiness in daily life; this clearly emerges in his 2018 apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (Rejoice and Be Glad). We are to become saints, not simply settling for "a bland and mediocre existence" (GE 1). "We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves" (GE 14). Francis asserts that the Beatitudes provide us a pathway for holiness that is outlined by Jesus himself. We are always accompanied by our Mother Mary; "she teaches us the way of holiness and she walks ever at our side" (GE 176).

Experiencing Church as Community. Pope Francis encourages Catholics to be active members of the Church, despite its failures and imperfections, because the Church is the place where one can find Jesus. In his 2023 Divine Mercy Sunday homily, Francis noted that Jesus chose to appear to Saint Thomas when he was with the community of the other disciples, not when he was alone. Truly, the Church has her limitations, but "our Mother Church is the Body of Christ…. And it is there [that] the greatest signs of his love can be found."

Concluding Invitation. It is a proven fact that walking contributes to our physical health. You are invited to take a long walk with Pope Francis; it will prove beneficial for your spiritual well-being. In addition, you will discover that it is a joyful journey in faith!

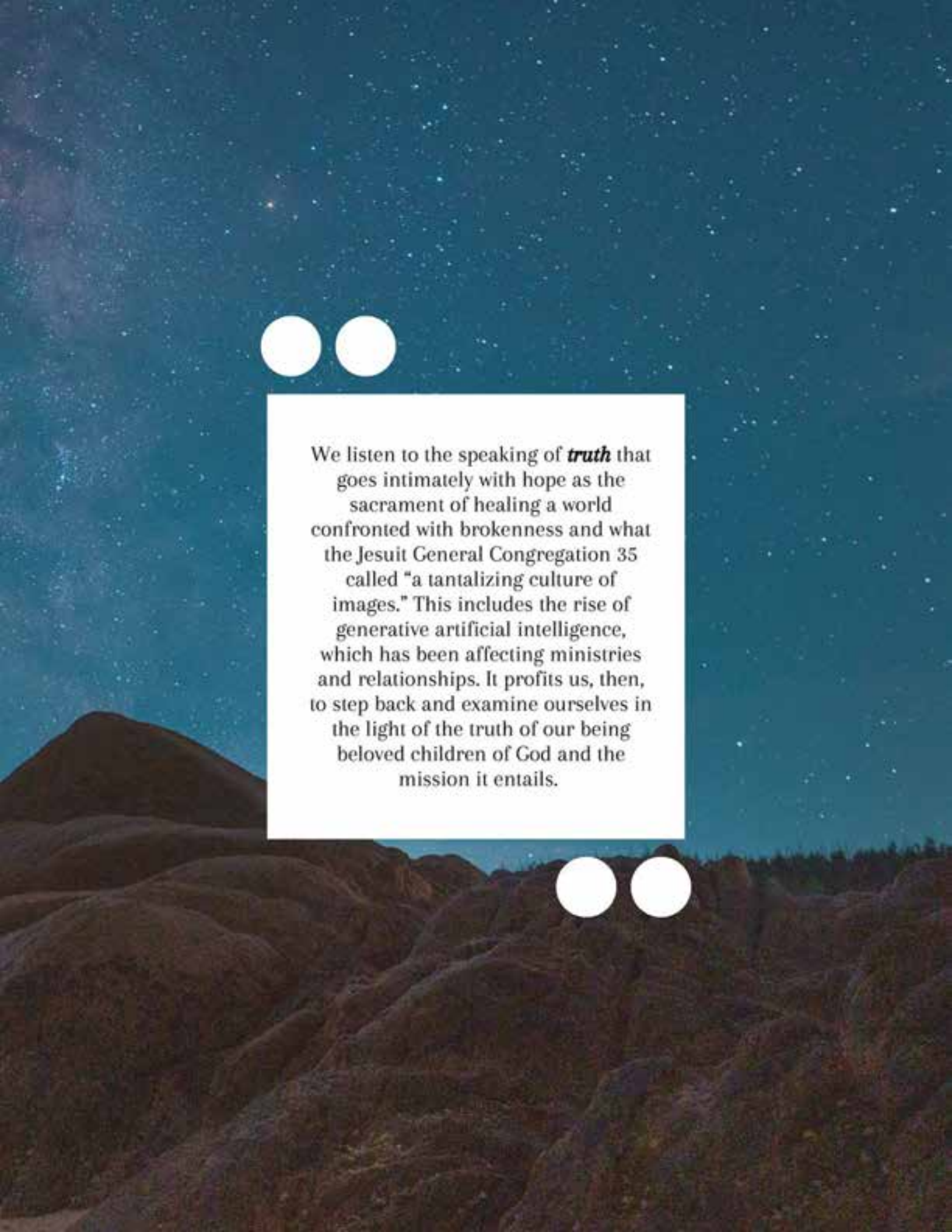
Fr. James H. Kroeger, M.M. served mission in Asia (Philippines and Bangladesh) for over five decades. He recently completed *Walking with Pope Francis: The Official Documents in Everyday Language*, a synthesis-popularization of ten of Pope Francis' pivotal documents from 2013-2022; it is available from the Pauline Sisters in the Philippines.

Pope Francis' photos are courtesy of CNS, Reuters, and America.






Jesus:
The
Truth



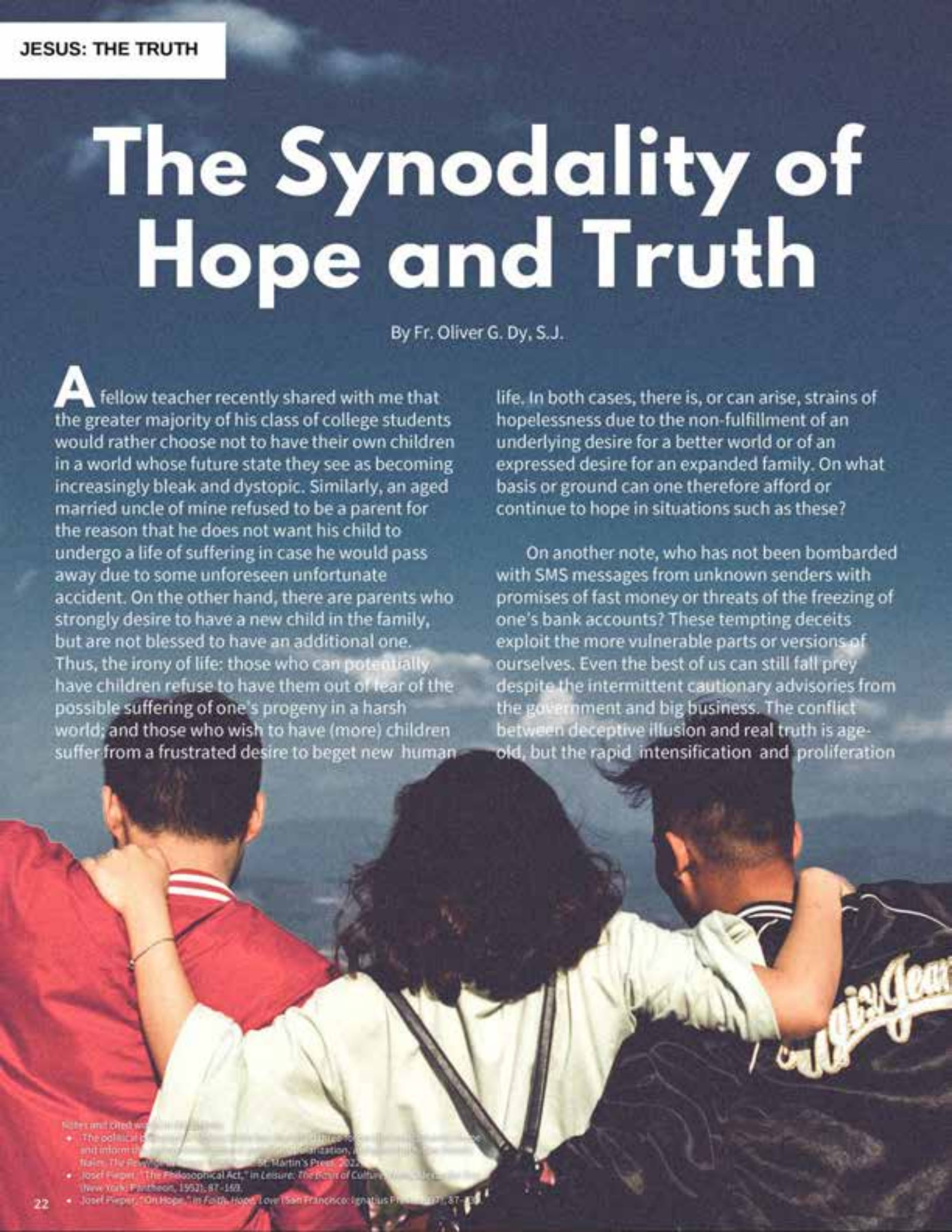
We listen to the speaking of ***truth*** that goes intimately with hope as the sacrament of healing a world confronted with brokenness and what the Jesuit General Congregation 35 called "a tantalizing culture of images." This includes the rise of generative artificial intelligence, which has been affecting ministries and relationships. It profits us, then, to step back and examine ourselves in the light of the truth of our being beloved children of God and the mission it entails.

The Synodality of Hope and Truth

By Fr. Oliver G. Dy, S.J.

A fellow teacher recently shared with me that the greater majority of his class of college students would rather choose not to have their own children in a world whose future state they see as becoming increasingly bleak and dystopic. Similarly, an aged married uncle of mine refused to be a parent for the reason that he does not want his child to undergo a life of suffering in case he would pass away due to some unforeseen unfortunate accident. On the other hand, there are parents who strongly desire to have a new child in the family, but are not blessed to have an additional one. Thus, the irony of life: those who can potentially have children refuse to have them out of fear of the possible suffering of one's progeny in a harsh world; and those who wish to have (more) children suffer from a frustrated desire to beget new human life. In both cases, there is, or can arise, strains of hopelessness due to the non-fulfillment of an underlying desire for a better world or of an expressed desire for an expanded family. On what basis or ground can one therefore afford or continue to hope in situations such as these?

On another note, who has not been bombarded with SMS messages from unknown senders with promises of fast money or threats of the freezing of one's bank accounts? These tempting deceits exploit the more vulnerable parts or versions of ourselves. Even the best of us can still fall prey despite the intermittent cautionary advisories from the government and big business. The conflict between deceptive illusion and real truth is age-old, but the rapid intensification and proliferation



Notes and cited works

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- Josef Pieper, "The Philosophical Act," in *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1952), 87–169.
- Josef Pieper, "On Hope," in *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 37–…

of deceit in technological platforms of communication, as seen for example in the instructive case of online scams, is a characteristic feature of our "post-truth" milieu. The big question here is: How can one recognize and embrace the actual truth in a world where falsities pervasively and recurrently appear under the guise of truth? How can one distinguish and differentiate between really real on the one hand and non-truths such as deep fakes projected as apparently true on the surface?

In the face of these complex problematic issues of hope and truth, one can nevertheless find solace in the concurrent emergence of "synodality" as a leitmotif in magisterial and theological thought. I wish to propose the idea that hope and truth reveal themselves as synodal in the sacraments of healing. In the anointing of the sick, a core message communicated by the community surrounding and accompanying the person in serious illness is that one never suffers alone: God and the Church walk with the suffering individual on the same road of suffering. In penance and reconciliation, a confessor is called to walk patiently with the penitent on the same arduous road of a truthful and sincere confession of one's sins. By naming and verbalizing one's sin before in a private and confidential forum, the masks of the old self are stripped and a new self based on the truth of one's fragility and God's mercy is born. Thus, the sacraments of healing of the sick and the sinner thus manifest the synodal dimension of hope and truth unfolding in these sacred spaces of accompaniment.

Hope and truth also resemble each other in terms of their architecture and dynamism in human history. Hope means that human beings are essentially creatures "on the way": that is, we are sojourners who have not yet arrived, but are oriented and journeying towards fulfillment in God as the ultimate goal and destiny of the created cosmos. Truth likewise has a processual dimension to it. The understanding of the truth needs to develop and be brought to greater perfection in the course of time. In a way, the Church's growth in understanding of divine revelation through the centuries (*Dei Verbum* 8) can serve as a universalizable model for human knowing. The ontological givenness of truth is one thing; the epistemological grasp and appreciation of the given truth by the human knower is another.



Let us return to the sample cases presented at the start of this essay. How can one respond to the fear of some at having children who would then suffer in a dysfunctional world, or to the suffering of others who try unsuccessfully to have (more) children, or to victims of malicious scams and phishings? By creating trustworthy spaces of synodality wherein people can open themselves to being accompanied by others and others in turn can accompany those who seek accompaniment. The disciples on the way to Emmaus created such a space of synodality by engaging in a meaningful conversation while walking alongside each other. It was into this same synodal space where they welcomed a third participant through whom truth and hope gradually became alive and aflame in the hearts of the disciples.



Be it in the Biblical past or in the present twenty-first century, the redemption of the human race lies in its rediscovery of hope and truth as fundamentally synodal.

Fr. Oliver G. Dy, S.J., a professor at the Loyola School of Theology and a house minister at the Loyola House of Studies, is a functional introvert who loves small good company.

Truth-Finding in Contemporary Images of God

By Sch. Kevin Stephon R. Centeno, S.J.

An important task of theology is to talk about God effectively. Etymologically speaking, this is what theology means: the Greek *theos* means God and *logos* means word or reasonable speech. Theology critically and intelligently interprets religious and human experiences to make sense of who God is. Both concrete experiences and rationality influence each other in this field.

Since humans are finite and limited in terms of faith and belief, the enterprise of God-talk develops across the ages. The medieval axiom from Thomas Aquinas is worth paying attention to: that which is received is received according to the mode of the receiver. As history and experience flow through time, our understanding and imaging of God deepen. We cannot absolutely confine God to a particular notion, worldview, history, and theology; a static theology risks committing idolatry—creating an "idol" according to human standards alone.

In her beautifully written book *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J., says that "the profound incomprehensibility of God coupled with the hunger of the human heart in changing historical cultures actually requires that there be an ongoing history of the quest for the living God that can never be concluded." In our world today marked by the barbarous excess of suffering, ecological devastation, endless wars, secularism, migration crisis, and the fast-paced advancement of science, what images of God are credible, relevant, and "worth believing" without compromising divine revelation?

Contextualizing God-talk is of crucial importance for "the symbol of God functions" according to Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J. in her classic work *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. How one perceives God affects one's understanding of life and the world. An exclusively masculine and patriarchal image of God justifies an unequal society wherein women are treated as second-class. An interventionist image of God blames God for all the evil in the world. Images of God are ambiguous; an image of God can be either a blessing or a curse. We all know that God's name was and is still used to support oppressive and violent actions. In a nutshell, God-talk is not innocent and is necessary to shape a humanizing worldview. In what follows, I will briefly present

contemporary images of God formulated by creative minds in theology. At the risk of oversimplifying, I would refer the reader to their lengthier writings for more details.

Empowering Presence

In his excellent book *Faith and Evolution: A Grace-Filled Naturalism*, Fr. Roger Haight, S.J., proposed an image of God which is attuned to the present milieu sensitive to the evolutionary and non-deterministic perspective. Science has brought to our consciousness the complex reality of the world governed by randomness and chance. God, according to Haight, is not a "'big person in the sky,' but a mysterious, overwhelming, and loving Presence within all material reality." God does not intervene in worldly affairs not because God is neither powerless nor limited. Rather, God respects the natural and scientific laws of what He created and the autonomy of human freedom and He acts powerfully, creatively, and dynamically precisely in and through these processes of nature. "God does not do in the world what human beings are called to do. But God is Presence, who accompanies and empowers."

Ecological God

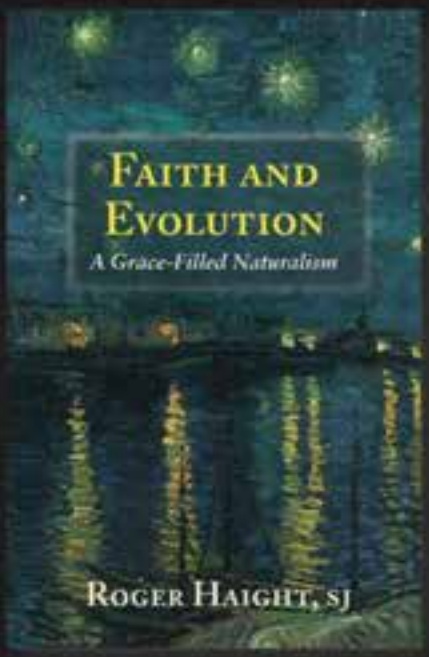
In the inaugural lecture for the Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J. Endowed Fund for Theology and the Earth delivered on March 21, 2023 at Fordham University, Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J. exhorted her audience to develop an ecological sense in tune with belief in an ecological God to address the pressing ecological crisis. In the light of this creation theology, God is a "passionate creator, lover and redeemer of the Earth and all its creatures—human beings among them." To envision God as lover of creation is in opposition to a dangerous anthropocentrism—the antiquated yet still existing "hierarchy of being" wherein humans have supremacy over all created realities. In support, Johnson cited Pope Francis' important encyclical on ecology, *Laudato Si'*, "We are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God's eyes." We belong to the community of creation. "The Creator is not a throwaway God. We humans do not stand alone as subjects of divine love. In the community of creation, we all share the core identity of being beloved creatures," said Johnson. The ecological God impels us to work for eco-justice by loving as how God loves inclusively. Loving God not only includes loving our human neighbors for our ecological ethic has expanded: "the moral law to love your neighbor as yourself would include the bat and the bee..."

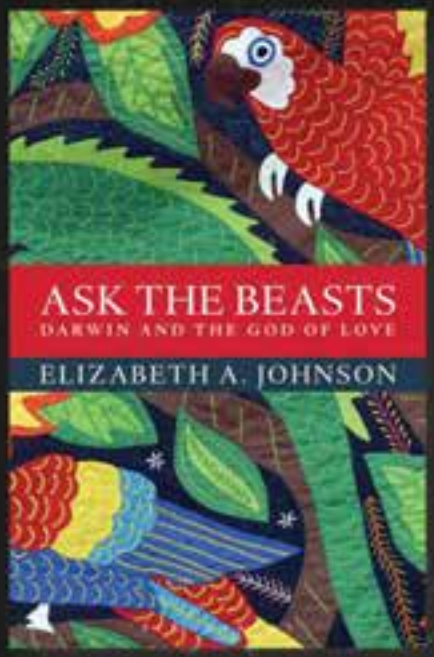
Deus Migrator *(God the Migrant)*

"Global population movements today are so worldwide, frequent, and immense that our time has been dubbed 'The Age of Migration,'" observes the Vietnamese-American theologian Peter Phan. In his theological article "*Deus Migrator*—God the Migrant: Migration of Theology and Theology of Migration," Phan articulated a novel way of doing theology and reading the tenets of the faith in the light of migration. In particular, he images God as *Deus Migrator* (God the Migrant). Since migration entails movement, God in a way also "moves." The two movements are "from a non-creative God to a creative God (whose creative act occurred with, and not before or after, the creation of time)" and "from an unincarnated God to an incarnated God (whose becoming human occurred in the 'fullness of time')." In the creation event there is a movement from the Infinite to the finite; creation is other than the Creator. Therefore, the act of creation "bears all the marks of human migration." God crossed the border between the divine and temporal sphere via creation. It follows that the migrant is the image of the migrant God. He or she "is the privileged, visible, and public face of the God who chooses, freely and out of love, to migrate from the safety of God's eternal home to the strange and risky land of the human family, in which God is a foreigner needing embrace, protection, and love."

Another essential movement is the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth which is intrinsic to the doctrine of creation. Jesus himself is the "paradigmatic migrant." "A migrant and border-crosser at the very roots of his being, Jesus performed his ministry of announcing and ushering in the kingdom of God always at the places where borders meet and hence at the margins of the two worlds separated by their borders." With the phenomenon of the plight of migrants and refugees, the theology of *Deus Migrator* reveals the divine solidarity of God with them and challenges us to build more bridges than walls.

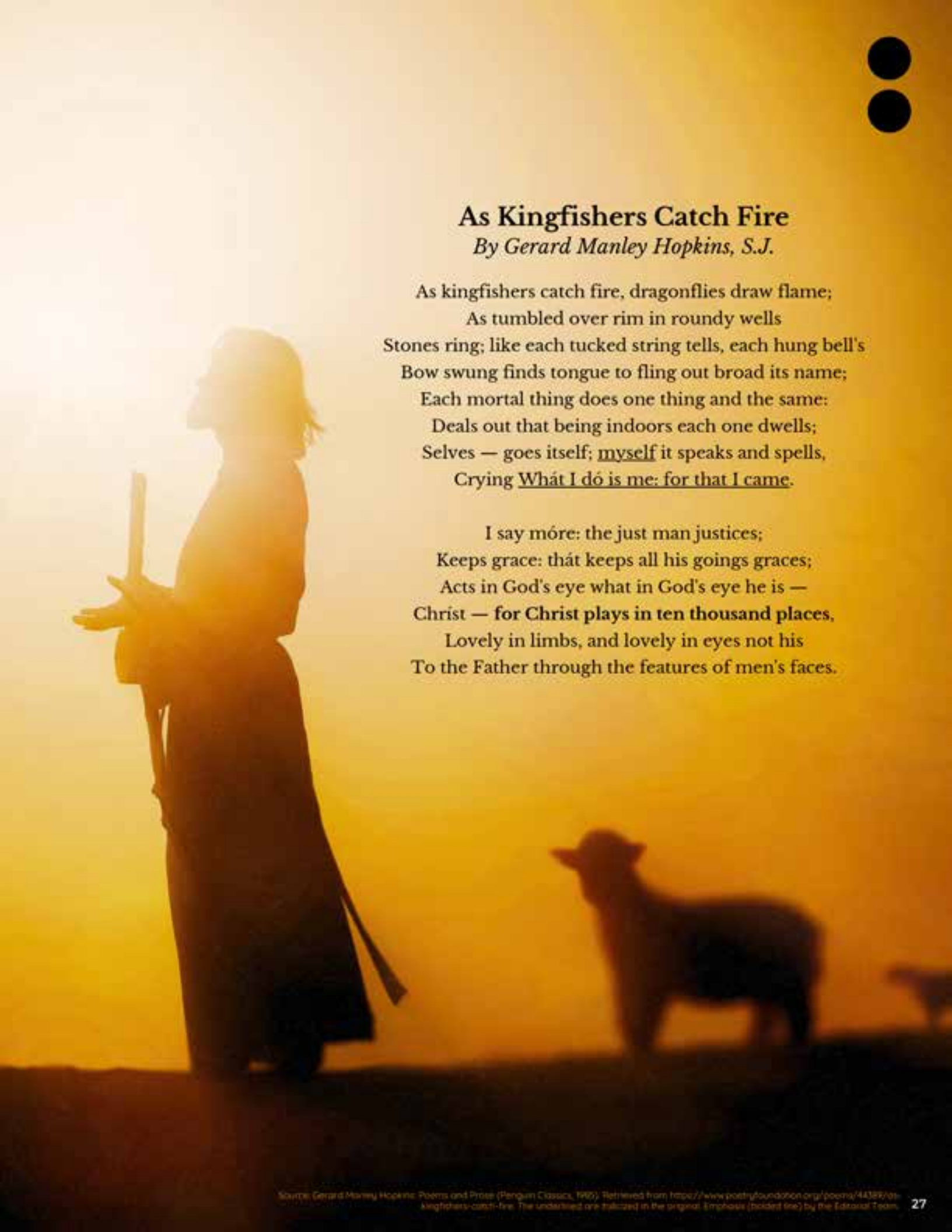
To end, let me quote Jon Sobrino, S.J., "I believe that the best theologians let their spiritual experience, their experience of God, shape their academic activity as theologians."





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As Kingfishers Catch Fire

By Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J.

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying Whát I dó is me: for that I came.

I say móre: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: thát keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
Christ — **for Christ plays in ten thousand places,**
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

Source: Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose (Penguin Classics, 1985). Retrieved from https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44399/as-kingfishers-catch-fire. The underlined are italicized in the original. Emphasis (bolded line) by the Editorial Team.

Engaging the Truth in Artificial Intelligence

By Cl. Anjon Fredrick C. Mamunta, S.S.P.

It has become an annual tradition for me and my confreres, engaged in the apostolate of social communication, to anticipate Pope Francis' message for the World Day of Social Communications. This year's theme revolves around artificial intelligence and the wisdom of the heart. While the choice of this theme did not surprise us, given the rapid developments in the field of artificial intelligence over the past months, what did catch us off-guard was the Pope's decision to dedicate even the World Day of Peace message to the topic of artificial intelligence.

Reflecting on this a few months ago, social media buzzed with images of Pope Francis. These pictures portrayed him in a white Balenciaga-like puffer jacket, riding a motorcycle, co-piloting a fighter jet, playing basketball, and even relaxing at the beach. Although these images appear 100-percent realistic, they are, in fact, deepfake creations generated by AI applications—a remarkable but potentially misleading feat. While intended for amusement, there are internet users lacking media and information literacy who may mistake these hyperreal images as authentic representations.

In response to the growing influence of artificial intelligence and its impact on various aspects of society, including the potential for misinformation through deepfake technology, the Church, under Pope Francis' leadership, has taken a proactive stance. In 2020, the Pontifical Academy for Life, in collaboration with stakeholders like Microsoft, IBM, FAO, and the Italian government's Ministry for Innovation, drafted and signed the Rome Call for AI Ethics. This document emphasizes the principles of transparency, inclusion, accountability, impartiality, reliability, and security and privacy, for the formation of algorethics which aims to guide the development and deployment of algorithms—an interesting move that predates the rise of generative artificial intelligence.

Fast forward to 2023, and artificial intelligence once again took center stage in the Vatican, appearing as the theme for the forthcoming World Communications Day 2024 and featuring as the topic for World Day of Peace 2024, which, I reiterate, was quite surprising. It left me with the impression that Pope Francis has acknowledged both the challenges and possibilities of AI.

Building on this proactive stance, the Pope's World Day of Peace message for 2024 reflects on the intersection of Artificial Intelligence and Peace. He emphasizes the need for the responsible development and use of science and technology to contribute to greater order, fraternity, and freedom in society. The Pope remarks that AI "ought to serve our best human potentials and our highest aspirations, not compete with them." The document also highlights the need to protect fundamental human rights and promote integral human development. It calls for the development of new technologies to be undergirded by the inherent dignity of each human being and the fraternity that binds us together as members of the one human family.

Additionally, the message emphasizes the importance of directing techno-scientific research towards the pursuit of peace and the common good. It urges that technological developments must lead to an improvement in the quality of life for all humanity. This comprehensive perspective underscores Pope Francis' commitment to guiding the integration of AI



Pope Francis' AI photos are courtesy of The New York Times.

into society with a deep awareness of its potential impact on human dignity, societal order, and the pursuit of peace.

In his World Communications Day 2024 message, Pope Francis delves into the realm of generative AI, offering profound insights under the theme "Artificial Intelligence and the Wisdom of the Heart." Throughout the message, the Pope advocates for a humanistic approach to AI development, intertwining spirituality and a profound understanding of reality. He stresses the importance of embracing a perspective that recovers wisdom from the heart, fostering an appreciation for human uniqueness. According to the Pope's equation, the combination of artificial intelligence and the wisdom of the heart leads towards a fully human communication.

Acknowledging the formidable data-processing capabilities of machines, Pope Francis underscores the complementary role of humans in interpreting and making sense of information. He calls for a delicate balance between the strengths of human technology and the acknowledgment of human weaknesses. Resisting the omnipotent temptation that may arise from AI's capabilities becomes crucial in maintaining equilibrium.

The Pope's message extends beyond the technical aspects of AI, emphasizing ethical considerations in its development. He advocates for a stronger, more ethnically diverse, and pluralistic society, aiming to mitigate the risks associated with humanizing AI. The message urges the establishment of preventive measures through ethical codes, international cooperation, and agreements in the realm of AI development.

Pope Francis underscores the paramount importance of preserving reality and the complexity of human experiences amid the surge in AI-driven data processing. He addresses concerns within the media industry, advocating for transparency in algorithms, content handling, and source tracing to prevent exploitation and inequality. He highlights the significance of maintaining plurality and depicting the complexity of reality in the digital age. Global accessibility to AI is deemed crucial for sustainability, particularly in developing countries. The message stresses the need for individuals to act as stewards of their thoughts, avoiding algorithm-controlled passivity, and encourages intergenerational cooperation in intelligent AI use while acknowledging vulnerabilities.

While the Pope emphasizes that ethical responses to AI are yet to be fully enacted, he underscores the reliance on individual and collective decisions. The message encourages viewing AI as a tool to enhance intelligence, emphasizing humanity's freedom in guiding algorithms. Finally, Pope Francis accentuates the role of time, vulnerability, and intergenerational relationships in intellectual growth, envisioning a future where the use of AI in comprehensive human interactions guided by intelligence becomes a central theme from World Communication Day 2024 onwards.

Pope Francis' engagement with artificial intelligence reflects a proactive stance, emphasizing ethical considerations, responsible development, and the pursuit of peace. His messages underscore the need for a humanistic approach, ethical codes, and global accessibility to AI. The challenge lies in translating these principles into concrete, widely adopted practices, and navigating the evolving landscape of AI while preserving human dignity and societal harmony.

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[The Truth in Our] Broken[ness]

By Fr. Jose Ramon T. Villarin, S.J.

In this valley of tears, where we are divested of all that is precious to us, only the questions remain. It was only two years ago, right after Sendong, when the questions below were asked. They have been modified somewhat but the gist remains the same. The reader will please forgive me this repetition at a time when words that are forced might only add to the debris and devastation. I only ask that you ask again with me and ask with those who are grieving. And pray for the asking not to end in bitterness. Let it echo on what has been hollowed out, let the questions be raised from the ruins. Let the asking be done at the foot of the Cross, and let it rest on the face of the *pieta*, on the faith of our Lady who in her life kept all these things in her heart. Let the asking be brave, out of love; let it not thwart our hope, let it lead to tears even, but let the asking never end.

When I saw raw footage of children being fished out of the water after Sendong, I found myself falling to tears, shuddering with deep anger and sorrow and helplessness. They were clinging on to logs that had been washed to the sea from the mountains. They must have been hanging on for hours, since the sun was already out and the sea calm. The children appeared to be in a daze as they were taken out of the water. In shock, they could not even cry, as children are wont to wail when lost or afraid or hurt.

Why must these things happen to our children? Why can we not see the folly of our ways? Why are we so juvenile we are disabled from imagining tomorrow, from grasping the consequences of our action and inaction? Why are we so senile we forget yesterday and fail to learn from the tragedies of the past? Why must our children hang on to logs for dear life?

Children are by nature curious. The hardest questions are those asked by children. A child from an indigenous tribe asks, if our goal is to go to heaven, why do we dig the ground? Indeed, we may ask with every child, if we must dig the earth to build our houses and schools and playgrounds, why are there so few houses and schools and playgrounds? Why must we live under bridges and learn arithmetic from counting coins we collect from selling sampaguita on the street?

Try imagining our country from the eyes of a child and ask.

Why are we so poor we live from day to day, and are left with little or no choice? Why are we so rich in gated places in the city while most in our country go hungry? Why do our hearts harden, our minds close, our arms give up so easily? Why can we be so selfish and proud we end up becoming quarrelsome and divisive, disabled from dialogue and building peace?

Why does our faith (Christian or Muslim, etc.) or, more properly, the practice of our faith not seem to matter? The ones who can shape but instead steal our future, don't they receive communion too? When our brothers and sisters face Mecca to pray,

what does God say to them? Those who couldn't care less about going to church or mosque or temple, where do they go and who is it that they worship?

Who learns and profits from going to school? If five children start schooling, why will four not make it to the very end? If heroes died to let this country live, why then must lives be lost continually to the water?

Why do we want to win and why is losing so hard to accept? Early on, we learn to play games, and play by the rules. Why do we change the lines when we step on them? Why is it so difficult to be fair? What is it about winning anyway that makes us so driven we defeat ourselves in our hate of the other?

Why do people lie and grab the limelight and take credit for what is not rightfully theirs? Why do our leaders take tribute for building things from money that is not theirs? Why do we live for the praise and recognition and allegiance of others?

Why do we live believing we are not loved enough? Why do we go about our lives unsure whether we are seen at all by those who matter to us? Why do we act as if God does not see us and see through us?













Try looking at our country from the jaded eyes of grownups and weep. Why can't life be fresh and simple and true again, as it is to a child? Where and when do we lose all this goodness and grow to be greedy and guarded and unsatisfied? When and how do we grow so big and full it takes so much now to make us happy?

In that raw footage of children being fished out of the waters, one of the girls started to cry quietly. Before she was saved, she was with her little brother floating among those logs. She did not know where he was and she wanted to know. In her tears, she was praying to know.

Why do we pray for God to answer our prayers and not for us to answer His prayers?

Yesterday, little Shoicho Kondoh of Japan gave his answer. The preschooler broke his piggy bank and gave all his savings to us. If children from far away can see what needs to be broken, why can't we?

Fr. Jose Ramon T. Villarin, S.J. is presently the Rector of the Jesuit Residence at Ateneo de Manila University. He is also the Executive Director of the Manila Observatory. He first wrote and published this article on 17 November 2013, two years after Typhoon Sendong severely hit the southern Philippines.

The Self in Truth

By Sch. Joel Leong, S.J.



The quest to find a personal response to the age-old question "Who am I?" can often be quite a roller coaster ride in the dark. This voyage of self-discovery amidst the turbulent complexities of life can take on a rather dizzyingly perplexing spin leaving us none the wiser. There are days where I feel so clear about who I am that I can confidently enumerate a litany of "I am..." Yet, there are occasions where I find myself behaving in rather confusing, unpredictable and even surprising ways. They contradict what I thought I knew about myself.

Gone are the days of neatly partitioned and ordered categories. I used to see myself as a strong, independent, young man, capable of surviving the harsh dog-eat-dog world and able to fend for himself. I was taught to internalize good values – be disciplined, be hardworking, be shrewd! Life was rather smooth when I acted accordingly. In fact, these were effective guiding principles for me in my twenties. There was no problem too difficult to be dealt with. Yet, as I matured into my thirties, I found these "formulae" becoming increasingly inadequate at dealing with life's evolving challenges.

With maturity, one gradually discovers that he or she really does not live in silo. And I meant this in an affective sense. Inasmuch as I desired to operate as a lone wolf (I always feel I get things done faster when I am on my own), I realized that I am not wired to be so. In this life phase, there is a genuine craving for companionship. Spending time with others, even in simple activities like sharing a meal, has become remarkably enjoyable. It might sound cliché but I really mean it when I say it is the company that counts! However, the thing about relationships is that they introduce a whole new array of complicated feelings into our lives. I find myself becoming emotionally "soft." I never knew I would be tormented with the feelings of jealousy, loneliness, and neediness. My mind becomes fixated on people and how they perceive me, and uncomfortable insecurities surface.

Human nature is often complex and multifaceted. As life continues to unfold, I discover new dimensions of my identity. Initially, these were intimidating because I felt like I was losing who I was. I felt betrayed even by my own self. For example, when I started my formation in the Philippines, I became intensely homesick and there was a persistent longing for home. On one level, the sense of longing itself was painful. On a deeper level, I felt



disappointed in myself for feeling this way. I thought this was a sign of weakness and these weren't me! I wanted to rid myself of these feelings. Of course, that was not possible. I cannot rid myself of my nature. Indeed, self-awareness is a dynamic process. Much of what I learned and knew from my younger days turned out to be mere scaffolds for what was to come. I thought I knew me. But, I realized, I only knew parts of me. There are emerging parts of me as I enter new life stages. I am a mystery, even to my own self. Not in the sense that I become hard to understand, but I become something that is unfolding with time. It is here that the greatest Mystery of them all comes to comfort.

In those moments of distress, He is near. Jesus was a gentle guide who helped me navigate through moments of uncertainties. In the liminal spaces of confusion and fear, He gave me a sense of direction. He was the source of truth that brought an assuring clarity to my own complex self. He is life itself – graciously giving meaning and purpose to my very existence. His tender gaze became an empowering presence that allowed me to come home to myself.

Who knew? That the tensions in life were not meant to be hastily resolved or discomforts not meant to be eradicated. Instead, they give me new insights to who I am. It is in this humbling space where Jesus helps me to hold my very own contradictions. He leads me to a more nuanced understanding of myself and my list now looks more like, "I am… but I am also…" He fondly tells me that I am not a problem to be resolved, but a gift to be discovered.



Sch. Joel Leong, S.J. is a Singaporean Jesuit scholastic. Before embracing the Jesuit calling, he worked as a social worker in a correctional facility in Singapore for five years. He cherishes connecting with kindred spirits, navigating the affective realm and learning about the beautiful intricacies of this world. He hopes to publish his own book one day documenting his insights.


Jesus:
The
Life

We celebrate the gift of ***life*** and our choice to devote ourselves in love and service. Stories of consecration fill the final section of this issue, testifying to the fullness that springs forth from emptying oneself in Christ. We are sent to proclaim this fullness of life in Christ, especially to those that even the Church has discriminated against through the years. It is in this context that the declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* is life-giving.

Into the Life of Lay Consecration

By Carminia Lourdes Cynthia A. Gutierrez

Family, relatives, and friends would give an honest, clueless look and just wonder… To begin with, the local culture is not familiar with it. One may be a nun, a married woman, or an old maid. Lay consecrated? What's that?

My story begins after a tragedy in 2006, when a fire gutted down my family's ancestral house to *uling* (charcoal). Though my mother was saved from the fire and suffered no injuries, she succumbed to the complications of a chronic disease after 23 days. A part of me died when she passed on.

My experience of this death of love in my mother reminds me to look at the hope that lies beyond the Cross of Christ. For the time being, I let it be... and suffered. But the Lord taught me how to hold this sorrow and suffer with Him.

Standing by her coffin during the wake the day before her funeral, I scanned her body and realized how she was my first home on earth. I then became intensely aware of my whole life from the moment I was conceived in my mother's womb. It seemed to me that my whole life had been swallowed by a bottomless pit.

By grace, a religious sister had placed in my hands an image of Our Lady of Lourdes. And all I could do was cleave to the image to keep from fainting inside. Then, glancing at the Cross beside my mother's coffin, I heard Jesus' words: "Behold, your mother." It was then that I received Mama Mary, truly as ever, as my mother from then on… I was grieving but not collapsing in despair. Grieving can take years. However, whenever it gets overwhelming, I run to Mary, who died with her son on the Cross. I realized how very good it was to

grieve in prayer. I had discovered a deeper home to dwell in, an eternal home already within me, and a way to be in communion with my Mama in Heaven.

Prayer doesn't have to be so organized. The heart coughs up tears that only God understands. It was in this way that God taught me a new way to pray, not with words but with the ears to hear His Word and with a heart to receive His Love. Such were the gradual unfolding circumstances of my "life-in-the-Life," hearing and sensing the immense longing to know God more deeply, to love Him more dearly, and to follow Him more closely.

In 2010, after a grand leap of faith, I left my family, friends, career, advocacies, and lucrative success in the prime of my life to serve with the Church in Her apostolates. A further *kenosis* (self-emptying) continued. I felt invited to respond in a radical way, yet, at the same time, I was being graced in mystery. If the Christian life seems demanding, it is because Love is demanding. I knew that I was His beloved despite not fully understanding where God was leading me.

In *Vita Consecrata*, an apostolic exhortation by St. Pope John Paul II, or in Canon Law, consecrated life is described to have different forms, such as Holy Orders, Marital Life, religious life, hermits, virgins, secular institutes, apostolic life, and societies. Instead of these canonically recognized forms, I chose to live as a consecrated lay person, privately, with a private vow of chastity, renouncing marriage and without a community.

The *Lumen Gentium*, as solemnly promulgated by Pope Paul VI, treats holiness in an official document, making it abundantly clear that everyone is called to live out their baptismal call to holiness, in different states of life. This would be my response to living out my baptismal call to holiness —to be Christ's own.

I cannot have a vow of obedience per se, like religious priests, brothers, sisters, or nuns, because I do not live in a community with a Superior or someone with authority. This is why they have the vows of chastity, obedience, and poverty, customarily called the 'evangelical' counsels. Some even have a fourth or a fifth vow. However, I undergo spiritual direction and try to follow and obey the Church's guidelines, i.e., the Catholic moral life, in the generic yet graced way that everyone is supposed to, including the clergy and religious. I am centering my life and submitting myself to the Word of God, Jesus Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

I now live out a concrete form of life in prayer, inserted in the parish with the liturgy, studying philosophy as a preparation to study Sacred Theology (STB); connected with other religious congregations by friendship and by being a neighbor with all other conditions to protect, nurture, and grow deeper in this particular call to a kind of 'contemplative living,' as an act of faith to be with the Lord, and in the way the Lord Himself calls me to be.

I guess the easiest way to answer the question at the start of this sharing is this: I am a bride of Christ. I am like a new plant whose features are yet to be known and all I am given to grow with is the certain mystery of Christ's incarnation. So, let Jesus live! This is the only certainty I have in all these uncertainties. It is better to stand out of the way and let Jesus shape and form this reformed sinner to the holiness God has ordained from the very beginning for His glory and praise.

Carminia Lourdes Cynthia A. Gutierrez (a.k.a. Chin-Chin Gutierrez) was a former film, theater, and television actress. She was TIME Magazine's Hero for the Environment in 2003 (Cover for Asian edition) and a TOWNS (The Outstanding Women in Nation's Service) awardee for environmental advocacy in 2004. In 2023, she completed a Master's in Pastoral Ministry with a focus on Biblical Studies and is currently preparing for the Baccalaureate in Sacred Theology.



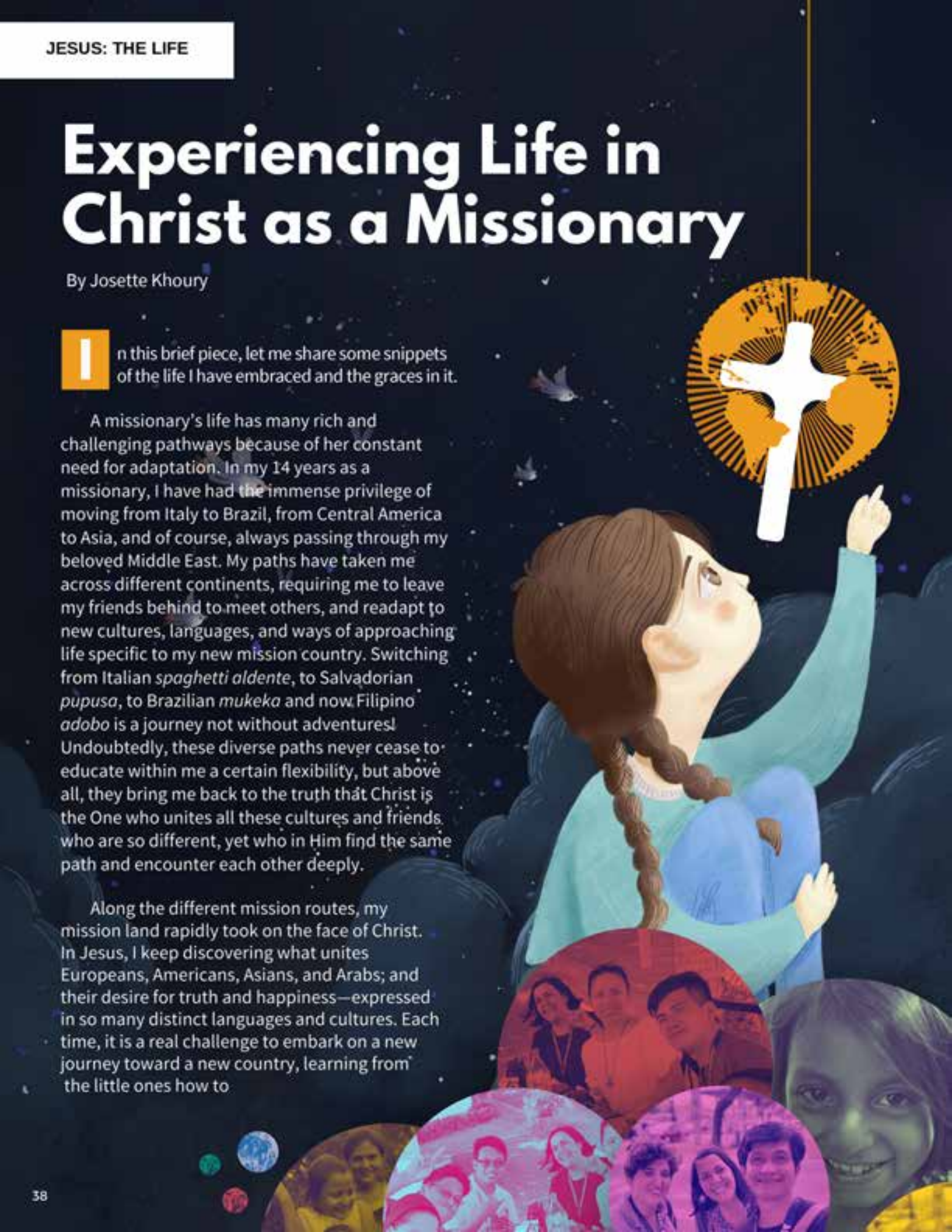
Experiencing Life in Christ as a Missionary

By Josette Khoury

In this brief piece, let me share some snippets of the life I have embraced and the graces in it.

A missionary's life has many rich and challenging pathways because of her constant need for adaptation. In my 14 years as a missionary, I have had the immense privilege of moving from Italy to Brazil, from Central America to Asia, and of course, always passing through my beloved Middle East. My paths have taken me across different continents, requiring me to leave my friends behind to meet others, and readapt to new cultures, languages, and ways of approaching life specific to my new mission country. Switching from Italian *spaghetti aldente*, to Salvadorian *pupusa*, to Brazilian *mukeka* and now Filipino *adobo* is a journey not without adventures! Undoubtedly, these diverse paths never cease to educate within me a certain flexibility, but above all, they bring me back to the truth that Christ is the One who unites all these cultures and friends who are so different, yet who in Him find the same path and encounter each other deeply.

Along the different mission routes, my mission land rapidly took on the face of Christ. In Jesus, I keep discovering what unites Europeans, Americans, Asians, and Arabs; and their desire for truth and happiness—expressed in so many distinct languages and cultures. Each time, it is a real challenge to embark on a new journey toward a new country, learning from the little ones how to



speak, how to cook, how to listen to the culture and allow oneself to be shaped by the richness and novelty of these new people. But at the same time, it is an immense grace to let oneself be shaken by grace and not fall into the faith-life routine that kills faith because it leads one to think, "I already know God."

I did an apostolate in El Salvador, Central America, with women working in prostitution in the poorest district of the country. These women, whom everyone judged and who considered themselves to be damned, longed more than anyone to meet Jesus. He alone is capable of revealing to them their true selves, of seeing them in their true persons without reducing them to the slavery of their work. Jesus is the only one capable of attracting and leading them step by step, just as he did for the Samaritan woman when he said to her that "true worshippers adore the Father in spirit and truth."

How many were the pure souls I have met in this place! Their sufferings felt tremendously heavy! These women were forced to work in prostitution or risk losing their lives or those of their loved ones. They were joyful and longed to receive us to share a gratuitous moment talking about any subject. Each time our simple gaze as friends tells them something about the truth of their persons, who are not reduced to their sin, but that in God's eyes, they are precious because He looks at them in the truth of their being.

There in the midst of their seemingly hopeless suffering is an experience of salvation with Christ. He alone reveals to us the truth of our being. Meeting us personally, He enables us to give the best of ourselves and helps us to not reduce others to their sinfulness or limitations but to look at them in the truth of their being. Isn't this the starting point of every Christian life? This personal encounter with Jesus who tells us the truth about ourselves and enables us to grow?

Still in El Salvador, I visited a huge hospital for children with cancer as part of my apostolate. A place where (I dare confess) if I didn't have faith, I would have been deeply revolted. There is nothing harder than seeing a two- or three-year-old child, intubated and undergoing such heavy treatment, being unable to run or act like any normal child. I tried to accompany the boy's parents who felt powerless and impotent in front of their child.

I had always been scared before walking through the door of this hospital. Afraid of being confronted with such suffering. Afraid of receiving the news of this or that child's death. Afraid of not being available to a parent or child... But each time, I would remember Peter's words to Jesus: "At Thy word, I will let down the net" (Luke 5:5). Once I crossed the 8th-floor threshold and saw the joy and bright eyes of those children at seeing us there to visit them, life took over and I no longer noticed the time passing.

Sometimes these sick children had no strength to play because they were suffering physically from the treatment, but we were right there, simply present at their side, through a smile, or a little joke, or just in silence. Despite their suffering, their eyes often radiated life. Was this perhaps childhood grace? No doubt! But more than anything, their closeness to Christ gives them privileged access to the Life they receive in receiving Him.

This was evident from the life that flowed from their drawings which they often offered us as gifts despite the physical effort they would have to exert to do it. Their joy and laughter during our playtime with them, their slight smiles and gazes when they suffered from the treatments, their little hands holding ours, and saying "*Gracias hermanita por tus visitas y gracias por ser mi amiga*" (Thank you for the visits and thank you for being my friend!), even their facility in talking about death as an encounter with True Life, telling us "if the treatment didn't work, I'll go to Jesus faster than you and send you gifts from there"... all these painful but profoundly joyful experiences left me speechless and helped me to experience just how much Jesus is Emmanuel!

Our God is not a God of ideas or rules. Nor is God a distant God, but a compassionate and befriending One. What a consolation for us as Christians! He is Jesus, the Vine to whom I must be connected in my missionary life.



Josette Khoury is a Lebanese lay missionary who is in her first year of Theology at Loyola School of Theology. She is a permanent member of *Tahanan ng Puso* Association.

The Divine in the Life of the Human Priest

By Sem. Cris Simon B. Abadilla



The International Conference on the Theology of the Priesthood, held at the University of Santo Tomas last February 12-14, 2024, was a significant event for the Philippine Church as it played vitally in spreading the faith in the diverse community in Asia. It reminded me of a passage from *Lumen Gentium* (10), "Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ."

In his keynote speech, Cardinal Marc Ouellet, the Canadian prelate, prefect-emeritus for the Dicastery for Bishops, and now head of the Centre for Research and Anthropology of Vocations (CRAV), exhorted attendees to "go beyond clerical ecclesiology." He highlighted the importance of rediscovering the priesthood of the faithful, which priests receive through the Sacrament of Baptism. He posed questions to the seminarians, priests, and religious in attendance, saying, "Is there a real awareness of the common priesthood among the lay faithful? How do the lay faithful exercise their priesthood respective of their identity?"

Furthermore, Cardinal Ouellet noted that the hierarchy should always be in the service of the faithful. During the sessions of Vatican II, the concept of the "priesthood of the faithful" was controversial, with some bishops and cardinals lobbying against it. Sr. Annie Co, R.V.M. raised points that could elucidate the faithful's understanding of their "priesthood," especially the priestly identity of women. Sr. Co did not lobby for the ordination of women but rather emphasized the significant role of mothers and how they help shape society.







Thus, exercising the priesthood of the faithful does not require ordination; instead, formation, support, and empowerment of the ministerial priesthood are sufficient.

As a diocesan seminarian, I have observed that this was not always the case. Priests I grew up with carried a "*pari-hari*" (priest-king) mentality, which they probably adapted from older generations of priests. Consequently, the laity were afraid to act and initiate programs for the parish. All programs had to be initiated by the parish priests, rendering the lay incapable of broadening horizons and creating sustainable programs that would remain functional despite the fast-paced transitions of parish priests.

Meanwhile, Pope Francis, in his address at the opening of the first international conference on the priesthood in Rome, exhorted, "It is imperative to remember that the People of God are hoping to find shepherds in the style of Jesus. Not 'clerical functionaries' or 'professionals of the sacred.' This happens when the ministerial priesthood becomes a 'profession' and not a 'vocation.' Priests who possess this mentality may possibly carry a duality and fail to integrate their person and their ministry. Thus, priestly burnout may happen; crises may happen."

Fr. Jordan Orbe, S.J. noted that priests must realize that they are first and foremost human beings with human needs. Ontological change does not take away the humanity of a priest. They are prone to burnout and need to form healthy friendships that can support them. This idea may have seemed novel to some who attended the conference. I sensed the 'uncomfortable feeling' of the crowd when sexuality and other aspects of the humanity of priests were discussed. However, Fr. Orbe addressed these topics in a way that allowed people to introspect, recognize their tendencies toward burnout, and slowly usher in acceptance and integration of their humanity and ministry.



Bp. Socrates Villegas, D.D. is right in saying that priests should always keep in mind: "Only Jesus! Always Jesus!" Priests must look to Jesus, who perfectly integrated His mission and His person, such that His Person became the message itself. The person of the priest is the most important message in his priestly ministry. It is in his person that the faithful encounter Christ, the Good Shepherd, who is willing to offer Himself for His flock. It is Christ, actively present and working in the priest's person, who brings conversion and attracts the faithful to follow the Lord wholeheartedly day by day.

Indeed, empowering the lay faithful to exercise their priesthood is a pathway to a broader scope of evangelization in various parts of Asia and the world, where overseas Filipino workers, as "reluctant" or "accidental" missionaries, can play an important role. However, Bp. Pablo Virgilio David, D.D. would say, "They need training." He continues, "When they really witness to their faith in their host countries, they don't go out to proselytize. It's the attractiveness of their effort to live the gospel as Christians that sometimes influences other people."

I dare say that the lay faithful know the object (or Subject) of Theology more intimately, as Jesus is the one they hold on to as they face life. The priesthood of the ordained and the baptized comes from one source – Baptism. Baptism brings about a variety of gifts. Thus, it is also oriented toward one goal – to be in communion with the Trinity. As the ministerial priesthood and the common priesthood journey together towards the Trinity, it is important to note that they support each other in mission. Ministerial priests cannot do everything, and priests should accept this reality. Priests need the help of the lay faithful in exercising their mission. The world needs priests who are closely involved in people's real lives, who live alongside them, and who understand their joys, sorrows, and pains. The life of the priest should lead the faithful to an encounter with the Divine.

Sem. Cris Simon B. Abadilla is a fourth-year theology seminarian at San Jose Seminary. He comes from the Diocese of Bacolod in Negros Occidental.

Fiducia Supplicans as a Life-Giving Declaration

By Fr. Eric Marcelo O. Genilo, S.J.

The declaration of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Fiducia Supplicans*, has elicited diverse reactions within the Church. Some welcomed the document as an advancement of the Church's pastoral care of persons in irregular or same-sex unions. Others criticized the document as a source of confusion regarding the Church's teaching on marriage.

It is important to remember that the declaration clearly distinguishes what blessings it allows and prohibits. The declaration allows spontaneous, private, non-liturgical blessings of persons who are in situations of same-sex or irregular unions. It prohibits public, planned, liturgical blessing of the irregular or same-sex union itself. We need to make a distinction between persons and their situation of irregularity. God blesses us with good things every day, regardless of our state of sin and grace. When we bless



persons, we are affirming both the goodness that we see that God is already imparting (e.g., faith, friendship, family, commitment, health, etc.) and the need of persons for specific graces from God (e.g., resilience in times of crisis, consolation in time of loss, hope in the face of despair, healing in times of illness, etc.). *Fiducia Supplicans* invites us to see persons in irregular or same-sex unions as persons blessed by God in countless ways, even if their marital or sexual situation is not consistent with the teaching of the Church. We are not saying that the situation of irregularity is irrelevant or unimportant. However, we believe a person is more than their sins and bad choices. We are called to care for the whole person, beloved by God, while patiently accompanying them toward more authentic loving.

Some bishops have expressed their decision not to implement *Fiducia Supplicans* in their jurisdictions for pastoral reasons. The Vatican recognizes that there can be situations in certain countries and cultures where the declaration cannot be applied because it may expose same-sex couples to violence and criminal prosecution. There are some critics of the declaration, however, who reject it because they doubt its authority since it was issued by a Vatican Dicastery rather than by the pope. *Fiducia Supplicans* was published with the knowledge and approval of the pope. It is to be considered an expression of the ordinary teaching of the magisterium. The Catechism states that Catholics are to render religious assent to the magisterium. *Fiducia Supplicans* has the same level of authority as other declarations of the DDF, such as *Dominus Iesu* (2000), the Declaration on Euthanasia (1980), and the Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood (1976).

The declaration did not change the teachings on marriage, but it contributed to developing the Church's understanding of blessings. The Church has always granted the blessing of persons in one form or another. General blessings are imparted to participants of religious events and activities such as World Youth Day, pilgrimages, papal audiences, and healing services. Clergy bless individuals spontaneously after Mass, often with a simple gesture and the words "God bless you." These blessings frequently have nothing to do with the



marital or non-marital relationships of the persons being blessed. Such simple, generic, and spontaneous blessings are what the declaration had in mind when it allowed for private, non-liturgical blessings for persons in irregular and same-sex unions. The declaration was not introducing something completely new or unprecedented. The declaration rather deepened and broadened the Church's understanding and application of blessings by permitting private and spontaneous blessings for persons in irregular or same-sex unions. The declaration's pastoral approach is consistent with the care for irregular couples taught by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Amoris Laetitia*.

Some members of the Church raise a concern that the document causes confusion regarding the Church's teachings on marriage. Confusion and resistance can be initial reactions to developments in church teaching and practice. We should remember that there was also confusion, resistance, and even opposition among some Church members in response to Vatican II's reforms on liturgy, religious freedom, relations with other religions, etc. Developments in teaching and pastoral approaches can be disorienting and uncomfortable for some Catholics who prefer to have a stable and unchanging Church. In his article "Development in Moral Doctrine," historian John Noonan acknowledges the tendency to resist change in the Church:

> *"Where morals are at issue, the process of change requires a complex constellation of elements. Every society, including the Church, lives by rules that keep its vital balance. Change one, and the balance is jeopardized. Hence there is a conservative tendency to keep the rules as they are, there is fear when they are given up, and sometimes nostalgia for the loss.*
>
> *Change is also resisted for other reasons. There is a praiseworthy desire to maintain intellectual consistency. There is a longing in the human mind for repose, for fixed points of reference, for absolute certainty. There is alarm about the future: What else can change? There is the theological conviction that as God is unchanging, divine demands must also be unchanging."*





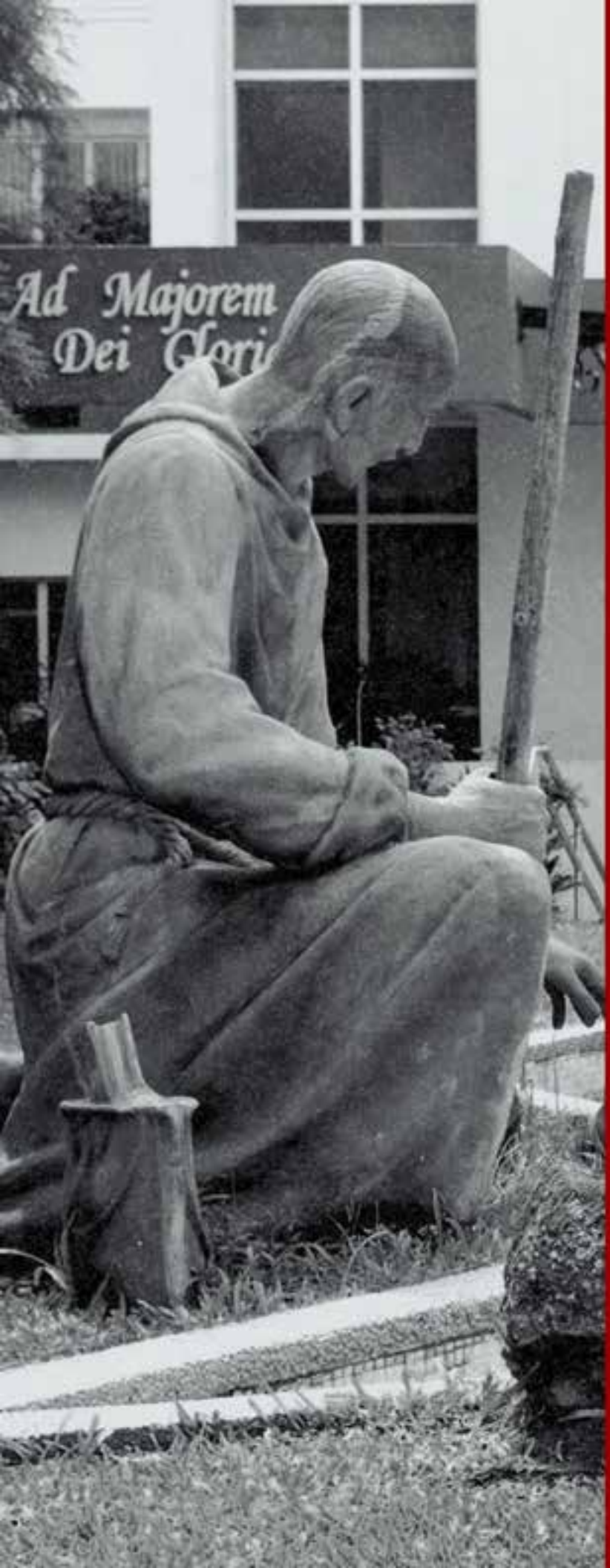


> The declaration was not introducing something completely new or unprecedented. The declaration rather deepened and broadened the Church's understanding and application of blessings by permitting private and spontaneous blessings for persons in irregular or same-sex unions.

Noonan addresses this resistance to change by pointing out an essential principle when seeking consistency in the Church. We should not focus on maintaining consistency with past teachings at all costs. Instead, we should always seek consistency with Christ and adjust our teachings accordingly. The Holy Spirit has always guided the Church to imitate Christ more closely throughout history. The Church changed its past teachings on usury, slavery, and capital punishment when it realized that Christ was revealing, through the signs of the times, a more faithful way of following Him. Christ continues to reveal to the Church how it can imitate Him more closely every day as new situations and realities present themselves. We should not fear change "if the principle of change is the person of Christ."

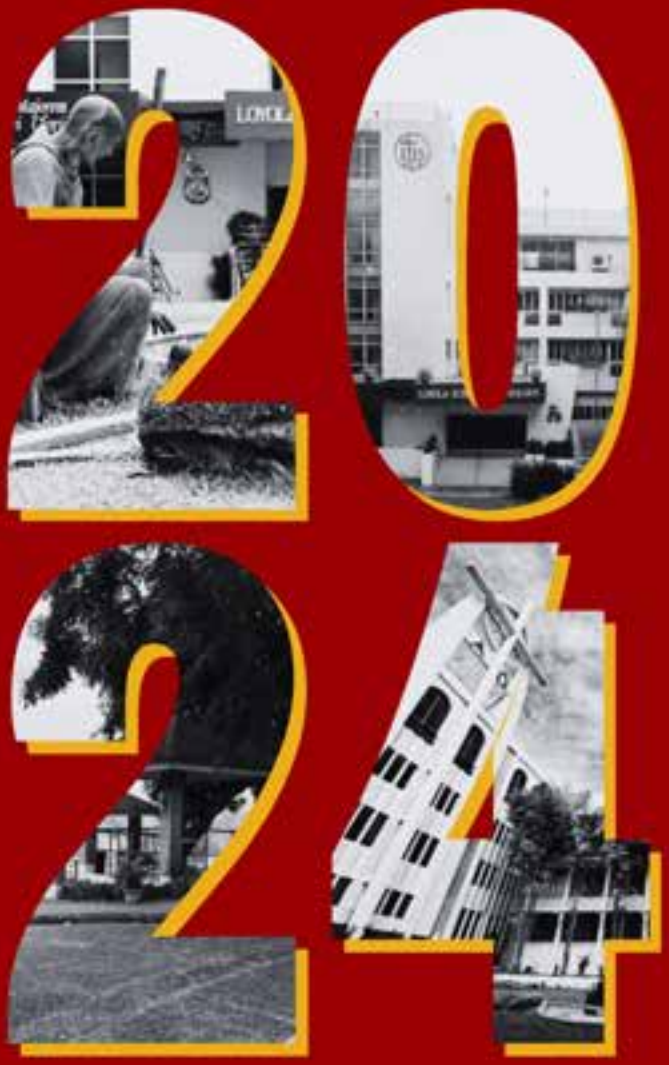
When reading and applying *Fiducia Supplicans*, the primary question we should ask ourselves as members of the Church and disciples of Christ is how we can be more consistent with the mercy and goodness of our Lord to persons in irregular and same-sex unions. The encounters of Jesus with individuals who were considered unclean, sinful, or enemies of Israel should guide us. A good example is the meeting of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well. The woman's status as a Samaritan and being in an irregular union did not deter Jesus from showing her respect and talking to her about faith. Jesus saw the inherent goodness of the woman and her capacity to receive and proclaim the Good News even if she was not acceptable in the eyes of others. Jesus blessed her with his presence and led her to faith in Him without demanding that she first leave her partner. Persons in irregular situations who seek a personal blessing from a pastor express a desire for closeness to God, a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. While making it clear that we are not blessing or approving irregular or same-sex unions, we should graciously and promptly cooperate with the Spirit's action that drew these persons to seek God's blessing and the Church's pastoral care. With prudence and goodwill, we are to show God's kindness to our fellow pilgrims journeying in an imperfect but grace-filled world.

Fr. Eric Marcelo O. Genilo, S.J. teaches Moral Theology at Loyola School of Theology, of which he is also the Library Director. He resides in San Jose Seminary, where he is in charge of Spiritual Formation.



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