

“That the Word of God may Speed Forward”

(2 Thess 3:1)

Introduction-I

The ministry of the Word of God is the special charism and mission of the Pauline Family of Rev. Fathers, Brothers and Sisters all over the world since the inception of this missionary family in 1914. This Family has rightly understood what Yahweh told the Israelites: “The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart” (Deut 30:14). This fervent flame of the ‘Logos’ burning in your hearts enthused you to be ministers of the Word in all possible ways, reaching out to every nook and corner of the globe. In particular, your press cum media apostolate is a splendid missionary activity through which you give ample witness to the living Word of God. In any corner of the world, we notice the *Pauline Media* outreach which makes available all kinds of Catholic literature and provides easy access to any audience. While the dedication and commitment of the Pauline Family in this specific mission is to be admired, the zeal for the Word of God that is rooted in your hearts is also to be esteemed very much.

Now (Nov 2020-Nov 2021) the celebration of the Year of the Bible, honouring the 50th death anniversary of Blessed James Alberione (1884-1971), the founder of the Pauline Family (*Society of St. Paul-SSP, Daughters of St. Paul-FSP, Sister Disciples of the Divine Master-PDDM, Sisters of Jesus, the Good Shepherd-SGBP, Sisters of Mary, Queen of Apostles- AP, other religious institutes and a lay association*) is a witness to the passion you have for the Word of God. Noteworthy is that you have at this time launched God’s Word App. In his religious journey Blessed Alberione had firm faith that St. Paul healed him. Hence the name ‘Pauline’ he took for his missionary Congregations which he founded primarily to do the biblical apostolate. Pope John Paul II aptly noted (25 June 1996): “His thoughts run from prayer to action; always intent on scrutinizing the ‘signs of the times,’ that is, the most creative ways to reach souls”.

Whenever I want a copy of the Bible or a book, either in English or in the local language, or a picture, or a religious article, the first resource that comes to my mind is the Pauline Media outlet. It is a notable and noble apostolate of the Pauline Family in every city or town all over the world to make available all kinds of Christian literature at an affordable price for the people. While commending profoundly your biblical pastoral mission in the footsteps of your founder, I appreciate your efforts in celebrating the Year of the Bible to explore further ways and means of spreading the Word of God ‘faster.’

Introduction-II

Until recent days our focus of ‘spreading’ the Word of God was to engage in establishing educational, social and health centres in every part of the globe. After the motivation given by *Dei Verbum* of Vatican II: “Easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful,”¹ we started vigorously translating and distributing copies of the Bible in various languages. Consequently, other biblical materials (commentaries, books and Bible diaries & so on) are produced and made available to the public.² By these activities we hope to engage ourselves in spreading the Word of God. Our biblical apostolate of communicating the Word of God, as very elaborately proposed by J.N.W. Wijngaards,³ remains in providing easy access to the Bible, commentaries and in conducting biblical courses. Even the use of the Bible, proposed by the Pontifical Biblical

¹*Dei Verbum*, 22

²The specific biblical ministry of the Pauline (Religious) Family is seen in the press and media apostolate.

³J. N. M. Wijngaards, *Communicating the Word of God* (Bangalore 1995).

Commission⁴ remained within the Christian faithful. They could be considered mostly ‘re-evangelisation’ programs. However, the mission mandate of Jesus, the apostolic follow-up of Paul and the spirit of Blessed James Alberione are more than a ministry within the Church; it is in the evangelical spirit of Jesus that we should ponder how the *Word may speed mightily* (2 Thess 3:1).

Context of Paul’s Expression

Let us now come to the theme of the celebration: “The Word of God may speed forward.” This is the explicit prayer-wish of St. Paul to the Thessalonians (3:1). This can be better rendered, as many other translations do, as “the Word (message) of the Lord may spread rapidly” (NRSV, NET, NJB)). Before we indulge in examining this phrase, we should know the context of this writing by Paul. Thessalonica, a Roman town in Asia Minor, was a trading centre in the region. The Roman imperial cult was already flourishing here. Paul, visiting it for the first time in AD 52, toiled hard to establish, mould and nurture the church there. In his second letter while warning them of their lawlessness, he exhorts them to live an upright Christian life. As he begins this chapter, he asks them to pray for him, for Timothy and for Silvanus so that the Lord’s message (Word of God) may spread quickly, and be received with honour as it *was among you* (3:1). This reflects the success story of Paul with the Thessalonians in his missionary endeavours.

Nuances of the Word of God (*Logos*)

The first focus of Paul’s request for prayer is *logos*. The meaning of this Greek word *logo*, in Hebrew *dadar*, extends from everyday image (e.g. 2 Pet 2:3: “with lying words,” Eph 5:6: “empty words”) to the deepest Christological terminology (Jn 1). The early Church applied *logos* not only to Jesus’ proclamation as spoken word but also equally with his person and work: “He cast out the spirits with his words and healed all illness” (Mt 8:16; cf. also Mk 1:27; Lk 4:36). Early Christian missionary language consistently attributed *logos* not only to the person of Jesus (Jn 1:1), but also to the missionary proclamation: “You received the Word with joy despite much tribulation” (1 Thess 1:6; cf. Col 4:3). Paul would emphatically assert: “My *word* and my *proclamation* were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God” (1 Cor 2:4-5). In understanding the specific nature of *logos* we have to look at Jesus Himself. Paul clarifies that the *Word* of the Cross (1 Cor 1:18) is the content of Christian *Kerygma* (Gal 3:1) which stands in sharp contrast to the wisdom of the world. In this sense we should note that Jesus is the content and spirit of proclamation by which believers are added and formed.

The missionary proclamation (Jn 17:20) creates fellowship with God through Jesus Christ whose word we have to keep (Jn 8:51ff; 14:23; 15:20), reflecting it in our fellowship with our sisters and brothers. That is why it is said that the *Word of God* demands a committed life of the proclaimer (Jn 13: 34) and a clear decision by the hearers (Mk 4). This involves either acceptance in faith or rejection (Jn 5:24; 12:48). It goes along with the command of Yahweh: “*Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.*” (Deut 6:6-7). Moreover, the Missionary terminology of Acts (e.g. 4:31; 6:2; 8:14; 11:1; 13:5; 18:11) emphasizes the apostolic proclamation of the Word of God. As H. Riti would observe, the messengers of the Word of God are to become ministers of the Word of God (Acts 6:4).⁵

⁴*Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (NBCLC: Bangalore 1993), 117-127.*

⁵Cf. H. Riti, “*logos*,” in eds. Horst Balz and G. Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 2 (Michigan 1991) 359.

The specific nuance of *logos* used by Paul in 2 Thess 3:1 is not just the content of Christian *kerygma* but Jesus the Word and his personality of being the Saviour of the universe. This Jesus is not just a historical person of the past but “the Way, Truth and Life” (Jn 14:6) of every person who, like the Roman Centurion (Lk 7:1-10), encounters him with faith. The *logos* is so powerful that, as Yahweh told the Israelites: “The word is very near you, it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it” (Deut 30:14). When our mind and heart is the tabernacle of the Word, it should be made present among the people in the perspective of the Incarnation. As Maria Ko Ha-Fong states, the command “go and proclaim” (Mt 28:19) is inseparable from the saying: “Do this in memory of me” (Lk 22:19).⁶

May Speed Forward

The next and primary object of Paul’s request for prayer is that the Word of God may *speed forward* or that the word of God may run swiftly (cf. Ps 147:15). It is to be noted that Paul, many a time, describes his apostolic activities in sports language, like “running” (cf. 1 Cor 9:24; Gal 2:2; Phil 2:16). But here it is the message that should run rather than the messenger. This indicates the spread or progress of the Gospel (“spread rapidly”) with the effect, Paul continues to state, that this might be “glorified (*doxozetai*) everywhere, just as it is among you.” Here “*glorified*” would mean that the Gospel may be *received with honour* as in the case of the Gentiles of Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:48).⁷ Paul witnessed that the Word of God made triumphant progress among the Thessalonians and he tried to include them in his missionary endeavour by inviting their fellowship in prayer. Thus, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, many centuries later, living within the four walls of her convent, is believed to be a missionary by actively involving herself in praying for the missions. Paul makes the Thessalonians missionary co-operators in his ministry to the Word.

Paul very succinctly puts forward the missionary program, mandated by Jesus, for all believers to spread the Word of God with an end-result of willing acceptance by the non-believers: “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mk 16:15). Taking this to heart, Paul proclaimed: “Woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel” (1 Cor 9:16). Paul, moved by “apostolic mysticism,”⁸ had an intense desire to reach out to all nations (Rom 15:16-21) so that the sinful world might be saved through Jesus Christ (2 Cor 6:2). Paul felt the urgency of proclaiming the Gospel which would effect salvation because “all humankind has sinned and is deprived of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). In the words of Lucien Legrand, “His task was to ‘preach the Gospel’ in all eschatological *haste*, leaving conversion to God.”⁹

Lukan Perspective of the Spread of the Word of God

Luke, writing the Acts of the Apostles, after the missionary life of Paul, brings out the aftermath of early apostolic activities. The seed of the Gospel implanted by Paul and the other Apostles began to bear fruit. In Acts, the apostolic preaching about Jesus, the message of the whole Christ-event, become the Word of God. The priority of the ministry to the Word is explicitly expressed in Acts 6:2: “It is not right for us to neglect the Word of God to wait on tables.” The numerical summaries, as termed by J. A. Fitzmyer,¹⁰ indicate the progress of the Word of God.¹¹ When Luke writes that “the Word of God continued to spread and the

⁶Maria Ko Ha-Fong, “The Whole Bible is a Parable,” *Word & Worship* (Vol 32, 1-3/1999), 7.

⁷Cf. F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, WBC:45 (Texas 1982), 198.

⁸Lucien Cerfaux, *The Christian in the Theology of St. Paul* (London 1967), 371.

⁹L. Legrand, *Unity and Plurality: Mission in the Bible* (Ishvani Publication, Pune 1992), 113.

¹⁰J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, AB: 31 (New York 1998), 98.

¹¹Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7; 9:31; 11:21, 24

number of the disciples increased greatly” he underlines that the spread of the Word of God is the spread of the members of the Church.

In fact, the Word of God begets believers (Church) and the believers become ministers to the same Word through proclamation. However, it is to be noted that while Luke speaks of the multiplication of the disciples, ‘his direct attention is to the creative force behind its growth, the Word of God.’¹² That is the reason he emphasizes the “Word of God spread greatly” (6:7), meaning, “the Word of God continued to advance and gain adherents” (12:24) and the believers “grew mightily and prevailed” (19:20). Luke pictures that the Word of God enjoined the Apostles to proclamation; while they in their turn carried the Word to others who are captivated by the same Word. For Luke, the Word, though it is destined to be opposed (Lk 2:34), spreads rapidly while it also makes the believers continue to grow in the midst of persecutions and conflicts. That is history. The humans become the “soil,” instruments and agents of the Word of God which brings, as the prophetic proclamation of the OT attests, encouragement to the just and warning to the wicked.

Missionary Consciousness of the Early Church!

We have numerous references in the NT to show how the early apostolic communities understood and put into practice the mission they received from the Lord. The Christian communities felt they were founded totally on the power of the Gospel (Act 2; 4). The expressions of St. Paul (for example: “*I am not ashamed of the Gospel*”- Rom 1:16; “*Not that I boast of preaching the Gospel since it is a duty*” -1 Cor 9:16, “*I have never shrunk from announcing to you God's design in its entirety*” -Act 20:27)- reveal the missionary consciousness of the early Church. The words of St. Peter (“*Of all the names in the world given to men this is the only one by which we can be saved*” -Act 4:12) echo the foundation of the missionary witness. We must also remember that the Apostolic community is not tempted to talk of itself and of its problems but rather resolves its serious problems by preaching Jesus Christ, His life among the people and His resurrection (cf. Acts 15; 1 Cor 15:3).

Changed Realities of Today

As we contemplate how to make the Word of God spread fast in the world, we have to take into account the changing global realities of today.

1. Rough Soil of the World

The world of today is a totally different terrain than that of St. Paul. The missionary world of Paul was mostly of Greek cultural milieu; they were all under one imperial rule, could follow his language and did not have a conflicting social set-up. ‘He had the Roman protection. He found under the Roman government something more than peace and security of travel. ‘He found toleration and an open field for his preaching.’¹³ On the other hand, today we live in the conflicting situations of multi-religious context of Asia and the world at large, fierce anti-Christian political and social uprisings, increasing menace created by anti-ecological environment, displacement of migrants, religious fundamentalism and over-drawn secularism all over the world. Shashi Tharoor has very elaborately written about the dangers of radical and revolutionary nationalism of today’s world, resulting in Donald Trump’s “America First,” xenophobic populism of Boris Johnson of UK, Narendra Modi of India, Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, Viktor Orban of Hungary, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, or Vladimir

¹²Cf. Joseph Lazar, *Growth in the New Testament* (ATC, Bangalore 2016), 153; R. C. Tonnehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation of Acts of the Apostle, II* (Minneapolis 1994), 82.

¹³ Cf. Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Michigan 1999), 14.

Putin of Russia.¹⁴ Until the 20th century a Christian was seen as “a Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion and Oriental in Worship.”¹⁵ But in India today, along the lines of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and M. S. Golwalkar, radical patriotism is pressed so much that people of religious beliefs other than Hindus become unwelcome in Hindutva-led India. You can be a Christian-Hindu, Muslim-Hindu or Parsi-Hindu but not just a Christian, Muslim or Parsi.¹⁶ This is in consonance with racism and similar divisions in other parts of the world.

Pope Francis also warns of painful “spiritual desertification” and “sterile Christian world” manifesting in hiding one’s faith on account of violent opposition to Christianity.¹⁷ The heavy but attractive ‘cross’ of temptations of profit-oriented and consumerist secularism gravely deviate even good but weak-hearted faithful. As Paul, seeing a similar state among the Galatians (1:6), wrote: “My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (4:19). This calls for re-evangelization or spreading the Word that will motivate men and women to steadfastly adhere to their faith-commitment.

2. A New ‘Normal’ life

This is the painful era of COVID-19. This pandemic shows no sign of retreat. Millions of lives are being torn apart and displaced; hopeless anxiety is very grim in all sections of society. It has become a ‘crown (*corona* in Latin) of thorns to all across borders, invoking ‘global ceasefire in all corners of the World,’¹⁸ with a tough message: ‘No one is safe until everyone is safe.’¹⁹ People are yet unsure whether this dreadful pandemic is the result of natural calamity or bio-war. Victimization of the vulnerable, a sheer threat-picture, saddens us day by day. Although Pope Francis opined: “the coronavirus pandemic has given us a chance to develop new ways of living,”²⁰ despair continues to intensify as we sadly note live-injustices in all sectors of economy, politics, governance and others. Pope Francis succinctly notes that this world-wide tragedy has made us “prisoners of a virtual reality, we lost the taste and flavour of the truly real.”²¹

Another sad factor is that in spite of the tragic pandemic, police brutality against peaceful protesters, political maundering and ‘horse-trading’ and crude expressions of arrogance among rulers and politicians continue to spread the “virus of Evil.” Archbishop Emeritus Thomas Menamparampil notes, “Coronavirus has caught us unprepared, distracted by concerns and conflicts of diverse nature, and blinded by proposals of half-truths, warped truths and ‘instrumentalized-truths’. We have become like “children, carried by the waves and blown about by every shifting wind of teaching” (Eph 4:13-14).²² Painful soil of natural calamities and man-made pandemic has become a new ‘normal’ today.

3. Apprehensions about Missionary Congregations!

¹⁴Cf. Shashi Tharoor, *The Battle of Belonging* (New Delhi 2020), 9-25.

¹⁵ Jacob Parapally, MSFS, “The Growth of Missionary Consciousness,” in Lazar T. Stanislaus, SVD, (ed), *Prospects and Pathways in India* (Mumbai 2019), 38.

¹⁶Cf. Shashi Tharoor, *Why I am a Hindu* (New Delhi 2018), 154; Cf. also, Thomas Menamparambil, *Stored Anger* (Bangalore 2018), 11-90. T. K. John notes another ugly face of India today: “water is Hindu, flower is Hindu, animal is Hindu, bird is Hind, indeed every Indian is Hindu” (*Vidyjyothi Journal of Theological Reflection*, Vol 81/8 Aug 2017), 263.

¹⁷*Evangelii Gaudium*, 86.

¹⁸ Pope Francis, *Strong in the Face of Tribulation* (CCBI: Bangalore 202), 64.

¹⁹ Cf. Francis Consalves & Vinod Victor (eds), *Corona of Thorns? Or Corona of Life? Changing Church in the COVID Context* (New Delhi 2020), 14.

²⁰*Angelus Message*, 1 September 2020.

²¹*Fratelli Tutti*, 33.

²² Thomas Menamparambil, *Fides via CNUA*, 20 May 2020.

We cannot deny that the religious presence is slowly subsumed by the social powers of multi-faceted hospitals, educational institutions and religious fundamentalist outfits which are backed by the ruling establishments. What was thought of as a special mission for some Congregations, within the changed milieu, has become extraneous. Also, some religious, who think they are considered only a 'work force' dependent on the hierarchy, are led to a perception of social irrelevance. In the context of powerful social media and the above-mentioned challenges, vocation to consecrated life is shrinking. Religious congregations, both men and women, in India and in some parts of Asia, make use of this situation to 'export' vocations to economically affluent countries; however, in the guise of mission, there seems to be a danger of amassing wealth to sustain or build up structures in their homelands. Clericalism, cases of child abuse, racism and casteism damage the image of the Church and credibility of the ministers are called into question.

As we are in the midst of this pandemic tragedy we shall ponder how *the Word of God may speed rapidly* and how we might live the mission-mandate of Jesus: *ad gentes* meaningfully.

Missio Ad Gentes!

Yahweh spoke to the Israelites through Abraham, Moses and the prophets. Although there are some elements of universal salvific notes in the OT (Isa 45:20-25) the Word of God was primarily addressed to the people of Israel and there was no proselytization to the pagans and there was no missionary outlook of bringing other people to the faith of Israel. But Jesus Christ made a breakthrough. "His incarnation is the most perfect expression of the divine mission to those far away."²³ His mission was to bring the good news of liberation to the poor, bear witness to selfless love, mercy and forgiveness; thus, he invited his audience to a change of heart in order to obtain the incorrupt life (1 Cor 15).

With their post-resurrection experience the followers of Christ firmly understood that he is the Good News and took his mission as a mandate (Mk 16:15), first, to proclaim and bear witness to repentance and forgiveness of sins (Lk 24: 47-48) and then to baptise in order to make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19). Vatican II states, even in our times the belief is that the Church, a pilgrim on earth, is necessary for salvation.²⁴ However, the same Ecumenical Council believed, those who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or the Church but lead a good life, are not excluded from salvation.²⁵ Here comes the emphasis of the intrinsic nature of the Church with regard to its commitment to evangelization and the duty of all the baptised to proclaim the Gospel.²⁶

Pope Francis declared last October the Extraordinary Missionary Month (*Baptised and Sent: the Church of Christ on mission in the World*) to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Pope Benedict XV's Apostolic Letter: *Maximum Illud* (30 November 1919). In the present context of the world, Pope Francis intends mainly to renew the faith and missionary commitment of the entire Church. He mentions the missionary formation/consciousness which motivates us to "preach to all the world" (*ad gentes*). This was the concern, all through the centuries, of the Apostolic Fathers, western missionaries to Asia and Africa. This is directed to '*Propagation of Faith*,' resulting in baptizing the believers and establishing Christian communities.

At this stage of history there is a need to have a new paradigm shift in living Jesus' mission-mandate in 'mission' countries, like India and to venture a program of re/new

²³Adam Wolanin, "The Mission of Christ," *Mission for the Third Millennium* (Rome 1993), 70.

²⁴*Lumen Gentium* 14,1

²⁵*Lumen Gentium*, 16

²⁶*Evangelii Gaudium*, 14.4

evangelization of the 'faithful,' as in the case of the so-called Christian countries. In fact, Paul wrote letters mainly to re-evangelize the already established Christian communities.

But in the course of time, the term "mission" (spreading the Word) has become ambiguous. We have to admit also that consequently this 'missionary propagation,' as Soares Prabhu notes, has led to some very negative consequences like imperialism, colonialism, slave trade, paternalism, intolerance and lack of credibility.²⁷ Lucien Legrand has observed: "The word 'missionary' is so intimately associated with a savage, arrogant proselytism that its use has become altogether taboo."²⁸ This is because we have taken literally the Markan version: "Go and preach" (16:15) and not the Matthean version: 'going, make disciples' (28:19) or the Lukan version: "Be my witnesses" (Lk 24:48; Acts 1:8). As noted by Simon Pinto, discipleship is both to follow and to be on mission.²⁹

Ad Inter-Gentes!

No doubt, 'proclamation to all the people' (*ad gentes*), the original mandate of Jesus, is the source and strength of our missionary witness in a constantly changing world. Accordingly, *mission to the nations* is to be carried out in today's context, especially in the suffocation of "anti-s" in a disturbed society, as mission *among the nations* (*ad inter-gentes*), remembering that we 'are always missionary disciples'.³⁰ Pope Francis has very vividly proposed: "An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the 'smell of the sheep' and the sheep are willing to hear their voice."³¹ Francis of Assisi, Fr. Damien of Molokai, recently Mother Teresa and many other missionaries proclaimed Jesus Christ through the Good News of love, mercy and forgiveness to those who do not know Jesus (*ad extra*); motivated and strengthened the faithful in their faith-commitment to go ahead with a new vigour (*ad intra*).

A broader understanding of the spread of the Word of God faster '*among the people*' leads us to be among/with any individual or group of non-Christians or even anti-Christians as 'the light of the world' and 'the salt of the earth' with a heart for dialogue and understanding. "Authentic social dialogue involves the ability to respect the other's point of view and to admit that it may include legitimate convictions and concerns."³² Here there is no boundary of region, language or ethnic/caste group; all are God's children and all need God's love and mercy. Not vocal proclamation but humanitarian service becomes the medium of mission 'among the nations.' As Pope Francis insists, any type of service to humanity, be it social, medical or educational, is the mode of evangelization. In all our missionary activities, conversion of heart, as Mother Teresa said, and not necessarily membership of the Church, is the goal of Christian mission.

Respecting other religions, honouring their traditions and cultures and having an on-going encounter with their way of life, our mission is enriched and tension is not only eased, but harmony is cherished. Inter-religious dialogue and ecumenism are the effective tools of this mission: *ad inter-gentes*. Working for justice, peace and joy (cf. Rom 14:17), trying to

²⁷Cf. Soares Prabhu, "Following Jesus in Mission Reflections on Mission in the Gospel of Matthew" ed. Isaac Padinjarakuttu, *Biblical Themes for a Contextual Theology Today, Collected Writings of Fr. Soares Prabhu* Vol.1 (Pune 1999), 35-36.

²⁸ L. Legrand, *Unity and Plurality*, xii.

²⁹ Simon Pinto, "Discipleship: An Ecclesial Dimension," *Vidyajyothi Journal of Theological Reflections*, Vol. 81, No. 8 (Aug-2017), 176.

³⁰ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 120.

³¹ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24.

³² Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 203.

uplift the poor and the oppressed, the migrants, displaced people and victims of sexual abuse in conflicting and selfish society should be the core concern of every baptised person, a true missionary ‘among the people’.

Missio Ad Vitam

Life-witness becomes a clear manifestation of our ‘carrying the Word of God’ to all. This can be classified into the following:

1. Proclamation by Attraction

Pope Francis invites every Christian believer to be a missionary by life. He calls it ‘*proclamation by attraction*’ which can also be termed as proclamation by witness. Justice John Michael D’Cunha, on 27 September 2014 in the Karnataka High Court convicted Ms. Jayalalithaa, the then Chief Minister of Tamilnadu, in her 18-year-old disproportionate asset case. This made a tremendous impact in the world at large and his Christian witness to justice was deeply etched into the hearts of the people. Likewise, the Kandhamal (Odisha, North India) victims/martyrs in 2008 are the Christians who proclaimed Jesus by attraction/witness; they are effective preachers by life. Doing my daily duties in my community, in the family, work place, market place, or politics without any selfish motive, but bearing in mind that I am a disciple of Christ, is mission ‘by attraction.’ This is in line with what Paul urged on the Roman Christians, “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (12:1). Much more than ‘door to door’ preaching or proclamation on public platform or media, a silent life of justice and love in society brings abundant fruit of an effective mission by life (*missio ad vitam*).

2. Proclamation by Witness

Jesus took upon himself all the challenges/conflicts of life for a mission. When he predicted his suffering and death, Jesus clearly said that he was setting his mind on divine things (Mt 16:23), that is, “to give his life for many” (Mk 10:45). The divine mission which he undertook to fulfil is not to live for himself but to “fall into the earth and die” (Jn 12:24) so that ‘he will draw all people to himself’ (Jn 12:32). This motivation even in the severe situation of shedding his blood-sweat at Gethsemane urged him to seek the will of God the Father (Lk 22:47). And this missionary journey for him was not a compulsion or a painful process but a willingly-undertaken mission as he himself said: “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father” (Jn 10:18).

The Missionary witness envisaged by the Church³³ is given in many ways; through respect and love, understanding and acceptance of others as they are, solidarity in efforts to accomplish all that is noble and good. As noted by Paolo Giglioni “evangelical efficacy of witness surpasses all speech.”³⁴ “The Good News proclaimed by the witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life.”³⁵

Love and mercy always remain the “driving force and sole criterion of mission.”³⁶ This missionary witness, as we find in the lives of so many saints, is the strongest “pull factor” for others to come to know Jesus and to become partakers of His grace. This missionary lifestyle requires each of us to be conscious of our special duties, to actively involve in forming Christian and human communities in the model of the early Church (Acts 2 & 4), to be ready to take up hardships for the sake of establishing *Gospel values* in our

³³ *Ad Genets*, 5, 11; *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 21, 41; *Redemptoris Missio*, 42.

³⁴ Paolo Giglioni, “Evangelization Process: Kerygma to Local Church,” in Sebastian Karotempel (ed), *Following Christ in Mission* (Bombay 1995), 147.

³⁵ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 20; *Verbum Domini*, 98.

³⁶ *Redemptoris Missio*, 60.

surroundings in a climate of freedom and availability, and to show practical tenderness and preferential attention to/option for the poor and the sick.

3. *Evangelical Witness!*

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount stands at the peak of his evangelical message which ends in inviting us to follow, not just Himself, but the heavenly Father (Mt 5:48). In all the previous 47 verses of chapter five of Matthew's Gospel Jesus shows who the heavenly Father is: merciful, loving, forgiving, just and holy. Here he gives witness to the Father by his evangelical preaching. The nature of God the Father's love and concern for sinners, the sick and despised is very well revealed by Jesus in his parables of the "Lost" (Lk 15). He said very emphatically that whatever he says and does is from the Father (Jn 5:19-21) and thus gives a very vivid witness to God the Father through his evangelical mission. This is much more evident in his address to the Father: "I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you have given me to do" (Jn 17:4; 14). This evangelical mission and witness brought him severe challenges and conflicts which he overcame with a spirit of martyrdom!

This Evangelic witness, as we find in the lives of so many saints (in particular, St. Francis of Assisi), is the strongest "pull factor" for others to come to know Jesus and to become partakers of His grace. This requires of each of us a life-style, being conscious of our missionary vocation, in the model of the early Church (Acts 2 & 4).

4. *Sacrificial Witness!*

It is indeed a well-known fact that the martyrs' blood becomes the fruitful seed of spreading the Word of God; they are, par excellence, heralds and witnesses of the Gospel. From his Nazareth proclamation we come to understand that Jesus highlighted the adverse reception of the prophetic life: "No prophet is accepted in his own country" (Lk 4:24). The essence of prophetic life is to warn against evil and encourage good, even to the detriment of one's life: "I lay down my life of my own accord" (Jn 10:18). Albert Nolan observes: "Jesus was not willing to compromise by accepting the Messiahship and resorting to violence nor was he willing to tailor his words to suit the authorities. The only alternative was to die."³⁷ This was Jesus, consecrated to the Father and committed to his mission to the point of death, even death on the Cross. The Post Synodal Exhortation: *Verbum Domini* very succinctly puts it: "The Church must go out to meet each person in the strength of the Spirit (cf. *1 Cor* 2:5) and continue her prophetic defence of people's right and freedom to hear the word of God, while constantly seeking out the most effective ways of proclaiming that word, even at the risk of persecution."³⁸

We are aware of the great blood-martyrdom of Jesus at Calvary, nailed to the cross. A Roman soldier pierced his side (heart) and at once blood and water came out (Jn 19:34). In the mind of the Romans and Jews this should have been a fatal blow to Jesus; but for Jesus it was a life-giving act to all his believers. Just as Adam's rib (*pleura*) gave life to the formation of woman, Jesus' broken rib gives to his believers sacramental life of baptism (water) and Eucharist (blood) that cleanses them of their sin and sustains them for a life of discipleship.³⁹ Here Jesus manifests his sacrificial witness by taking upon himself the role of 'the Lamb of God' who takes away the sins of the world (Jn 1:19). His 'blood and water' here signifies his spirit of compassion like the 'living water' flowing from Jerusalem (cf. Zech 14:8).

St. Paul is one of the best consecrated persons after the model Jesus. In Damascus, two objectives of his call were mentioned: (i) to bring the Name of Jesus "before the Gentiles, kings, and before the people of Israel;" (ii) "he must suffer much for the sake of my Name" (Act 9:15).

³⁷ Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity* (Mumbai 2007), 170.

³⁸ Pope Benedict, *Verbum Domini*, 95.

³⁹ Cf. Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to St. John, II* (New York 1970), 953

We have to understand that the second (suffering) is the consequence of the first (mission). In a little more than a span of ten years (47-57 AD) he established faith-communities in four provinces of the Roman Empire: Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia. In AD 57 he could say: “no further place for me in these regions” (Rom 15:23). Scholars would affirm that he is the supreme example of missionary methods.⁴⁰ Paul shines as a splendid model of martyrs, who said, “Death is at work in us” (2Cor 4:12). Indeed, he was in every moment manifesting his sacrificial witness.

Jesus told the rich young man discipleship costs (Mk 10:21). The cost of discipleship is steep. Indeed, many ‘faithful’ have chosen to walk away from God because of it. “The call to discipleship is all about the radical choices that one has to make in order to become a perfect disciple according to the heart of the Master.”⁴¹ Pope Francis observed: “Ours is a Church of martyrs; they suffer, they give their lives and we receive the blessing of God for their witness.”⁴² In this respect, *Verbum Domini* underlines the need to discern the “signs of the times” present in history, and not to flee from a commitment to those who suffer and the victims of varied forms of selfishness.⁴³

5. *Prophetic Witness!*

Prophecy implies a certain abnormality beyond the ordinary. Jesus, the greatest prophetic witness, uttered forty-one times the “I am” sayings, as recorded in the Gospels. These evangelical sayings provoke transformation both in individuals and structures. The evangelical radicality gives credibility to the missionary witness. Prophetic missions in today’s society and specifically in Asia where tackling poverty, slavery of all sorts, deprivation of rights is pushed aside by powerful trends of majoritarianism, nationalism and selfish hoarding of wealth, are launched with much magnitude and aptitude. However, it is evident, as in the case of Oscar Romero, the prophet of justice, Sr. Rani Maria, the angel of the downtrodden, Fr. Tom Uzhunnil, the suffering servant of the poor, and recently Fr. Stan Swamy, the sacrificial giant of the tribals, that prophetic witness costs as much as one’s own life. Nevertheless, more than blood-witness, life-witness to social justice and love of the oppressed is an effective means of proclaiming the Gospel in today’s context. This is in consonance with Pope Francis’ call for “moving from our comfort zone in order to reach to the peripheries in need of the light of the Gospel.”⁴⁴

A fine proclamation of the Word need not necessarily lead one to giving her/his physical life. In our service to the Word of God we are often left to bear mental tortures, betrayals, false accusations, misunderstandings, prejudices, insults, or severe opposition to the works of justice/mercy, as in the case of St. Mother Teresa. Hardships come in a variety of ways: temptations, illnesses, loss of jobs, broken relationships, and persecutions. Also, prophetic witness brings all sorts of mental and physical torture, not only by anti-forces in society, politics, religious movements and governments, but also by our ‘own’ people who share the same faith and vocation in religious communities. In short, the mission therefore is *the Gospel made alive*.⁴⁵ Word God, through our witnessing life, will intrude faster even into the ‘hard soil’ of humans.

⁴⁰ Cf. Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 4.

⁴¹ Dominic Kaniyantharayil, *Discipleship: A Costly Choice* (Bangalore 2017), 17

⁴² *Angelus Message*, 21, April 2015.

⁴³ *Verbum Domini*, 100.

⁴⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 20.

⁴⁵ L. Legrand, *The Word is Near You*, Vol. II (Bangalore 2002), 165.

Conclusion

The Word of God is the source and soul of not just the humans but of the whole creation (Rom 8:22). It "is living and active" (Heb 4:12) and "it has power to build you up and give you your heritage among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32; see 1 Thess. 2:13). One who encounters it with a sincere thrust will realise that it is the 'lamp and light' for our darkened path (Ps 119:105) in our life. It will prevail over us like a mighty warrior (Jer 20:11) so much so that proclaiming it becomes our life-duty (1 Cor 9:16).

The Word of God is sown in everyone's heart (Deut 30:14; Jer 1:9; Heb 4:12) and given as food (Ezeh 3:3) and so we are activated not only to put into practice but also to engage ourselves in spreading the same divine 'force' to others so that the whole created world becomes a new creation devoid of all evils. Indeed, the Word being divine can 'speed' by itself. "Sacred Scripture accomplishes its prophetic work in those who listen to it."⁴⁶ But we are told that, even though 'the Word was God, it also was *with* God; all things came into being through him (Jn 1:1-4).⁴⁷ This calls for human mediation as carriers of the Word of God.

No doubt, Bible is the vibrant and physical manifestation of the Word; but it is Jesus Christ who is the content and source of the Scripture.⁴⁸ Indeed, our pastoral outreach will lead to a greater awareness of the person of Christ.⁴⁹ Once we engage in ministering to the Word of God we are serving Jesus himself. As servants of Jesus Christ we are all set apart for the ministry of the Word (Rom 1:1). This mission is not confined to making biblical materials available to the common public but it points to the 'mighty' speed/spread of the Word, in today's context, mainly by life-proclamation.

We are the Word of God made alive in every situation and we are also to reach out to the varied vulnerable and make the Word present by our life of justice and mercy. The same thrust is given by *Verbum Domini*⁵⁰ in order to hold the torch of the Word for a fruitful mission in the world. Paul who proclaimed the Word mainly through life (Gal 4:12) is proud of his success-story among the Thessalonians: "Your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing (2 Thess 1:30). This life-proclamation forms the members of 'the Pauline Family' ministers of the Word of God.

+ Antonysamy Peter Abir
Bishop of Sultanpet &
Chairman, Bible Commission,
Conference of Catholic Bishops of India

⁴⁶*Aperuit Illis*, 12.

⁴⁷*Verbum Domini*, 11.

⁴⁸*Aperuit Illis*, 7.

⁴⁹*Verbum Domini*, 73.

⁵⁰*Verbum Domini*, 99-116.