

## **Valedictory Address Prospects of Mission in the Postmodern and Post-Truth Society**

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On behalf of the SVD Generalate, I would like to thank all the persons responsible for organizing this symposium on “Mission in the Postmodern and Post-Truth Society.” ASPAC-MER has been organizing this seminar or symposium since 1997 in various places, mainly among the SVDs though some SSs had joined at times. Over the years, we went on thinking that this association should organize the symposiums in one of our SVD administered Universities, so that the research papers, reflection and discussion would be enlarged to other collaborators and lay people. Widya Mandira Catholic University, Kupang took the initiative to organize it along with other staff and a number of students, and they have organized this symposium meticulously. My special thanks to Philipus Tule, SVD and Yasinto Yulius, SVD, for making wonderful arrangements to host this program in Kupang, and also to the lay collaborators who gave special attention to the details of this program. My gratitude to Jose Kuzhikkattuthazhe, SVD, the Area Coordinator for Mission Animation, who spearheaded the planning and motivating many participants to join this symposium.

Understanding postmodern society and how it permeates the ordinary life of a person is not easy. The world is ever changing, the cyber world brings with it the Copernican revolution. Changes occur constantly. Thus, to understand the present is a challenge. In this situation, the post-truth society operates with ever-greater speed; fake news, fake videos, spin doctors in the media, political spokespersons and corporate marketers operate to gain advantage for themselves, leaving grassroots societies in lurch. Postmodern society has positive elements as well as negative elements. To advance the Christian mission in this age of postmodern and post-truth, which is rampant with skepticism, narrow fundamentalism, individualism and exploitation, remains a huge task.

People are swept away by the baseless claims of false narratives and truth that has been manipulated. To name a few trends of misinformation: that COVID-19 vaccinations cause autism, police brutality against people of color is a myth, the climate crisis is a farce, etc., are some of the false narratives. Despite the overwhelming scientific evidence and statistical studies that run contrary to each of these claims, many continue to espouse these views because they resonate with personal experiences or personal likenings that have otherwise gone unexplained.

In the postmodern world, “we are placed squarely between the times of modernity and that which is yet to be complete and unnamed. Making the right choices is crucial.” Christian mission requires discernment, commitment and action to counter the prevailing situation of the postmodern and post-truth society. This is not easy, but it

is an ongoing process. If we make concerted efforts and sow the seeds of the Gospel values today amidst this challenging society, we will reap the fruits in the coming years” (Michael, 2020: 237-250).

## 1. SOME NUANCES OF POSTMODERNIT

Other papers have expressed the challenges and the effects of postmodernity. Before understanding the mission in this context, let me add some nuances of postmodern society.

- a. **Semantic Gap:** During this postmodern time, many words, apart from having their meaning changed over a period of time, also mean different things to different people in different cultural groups. For example, words like “silly” which once meant “pitiable” or «innocent” now means “lacking in reason.” This semantic shift happens as the millennials find new forms of expression and old meanings fade away.
- b. **Cultural Flux:** The popular culture of today is established and reestablished by powerful media elites. The values selected by these media elites become the order of the day. For example, if the cultural term “LGBT” was known as “LGB” yesterday, they can arbitrarily change it to “LGBTQIA” tomorrow. If they still don’t like responses to this change, they can change the term to something like “LGBTQIA+”. One can see how adding a simple “plus” sign helps them maneuver widespread discussions and define the cultural narrative of the day.
- c. **Scientific Changes:** Our knowledge about science and its associated theories can change over a period due to new scientific observations, as well as due to new social, political and religious convictions. Scientific observations can change overnight depending on the media or political influence. For example, “Drinking red wine every day is good,” “Drinking Brandy every day is good,” “Having a gun is good to protect life,” etc. Google plays a big role here in shaping public opinion on what is scientific fact.
- d. **Kruger-Dunning Effect:** This effect simply means the more you become aware of a particular subject, the more you realize how much you are still unaware of that subject. Well, this theory works for everyone except for the ignorant, megalomaniacs and stubborn people.

## 2. SOME CONCERNS

Although there are many concerns in postmodern and post-truth society, let me express mainly three concerns.

**Excessive Reliance on Technology:** Technology is good; it has brought a revolution in the way of living. It is hard to think that people can live without technology today. It provides convenience for all categories of people. It is not only the young and children who are interested; even old people like to use technology in their daily lives.

Some people even search for God on Google or on some other search engines. In the postmodern world, Google or any search engine plays a great role. People search for truth through these digital portals, and whatever is written people believe. This becomes the foundation for truth. We wonder where society will move with excessive reliance on technology. Critical thinking is necessary today to understand society, human values, community and cosmos.

**Religious Fundamentalism:** In recent years, religiously inspired nationalist movements have gained prominence in several countries around the world. The widespread use of religiously inspired political appeals can be witnessed in places such as Turkey, Latin America, Western Europe, and the post-Soviet states. While religious nationalist movements exhibit considerable variation, they appear to share many common attributes. They evoke religious fundamentalist ideologies and use these ideologies to ignite reactive emotions and nationalist attitudes to gain more political power. The goal of fundamentalists is to hold on to political power using any narrative that is suitable to them, distorting religious teachings. These figures do not act out of love for religion but more out of love for political power; thus the religious values of loving the other, unity, harmony, peace, justice, communion, etc., are tossed off to fulfill political and personal goals.

**Christian Fundamentalism:** Christians, especially Protestant fundamentalists have developed a tendentious understanding of “Biblical inerrancy” and a disdain for “contemporary science.” They would merrily gang up, put on their armor of arguments, and prowl like a hungry lion looking for its prey. But hardly would they pause to check their own logical fallacy or critique arguments in their own household. In short, Christian fundamentalism does not do good for the progress of society. It is a negative influence and a hindrance to the mission of the church. It exists in cities and villages; and at times, money plays a big role in fanning Christian fundamentalism. Careful analysis and planned counter-actions to Christian fundamentalism will be needed in this post-truth society.

### **3. OUR MISSION TODAY**

In the ASPAC Zone, we have 20 provinces/regions/missions (PRM) and we are working in 17 countries. The Asian Pacific is vast in geographical territory and has numerous cultures, races, tribes and languages. More than half of the confreres in our Society are in the ASPAC. Contextualizing our mission according to the needs of the people is a way to serve the people in this zone. I would like to look at our mission in Asia and Oceania from two points: First of all, the Good News of Jesus directly addresses the world-views and value systems of our cultures and through them seeks to influence the choices we make in our social, economic and political spheres. Secondly, any vision of mission in today’s world must arise from the point of view of its most vulnerable populations — the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed. They are crying for help, and we have to listen to them. This is the demand of the Good News. Our mission today

can be in facing the challenges of postmodern and post-truth society: an affirmation of life, an experience of life in community and an awareness of transcendence, building intercultural and interreligious communities, and promoting the prophetic role of the church.

### **3.1 AN AFFIRMATION OF LIFE**

Postmodernity has accustomed us to turning everything into an object which can be observed, measured, manipulated and exploited for selfish human ends. The mechanization process has made human beings machines, and they are manipulated by the powerful. Human beings also approach nature for their own satisfaction with manipulation, destruction and exploitation of natural resources and its many forms of life. The media also manipulates the human mind ever-more towards consumerism.

In this context, the Good News affirms life. The 18<sup>th</sup> SVD General Chapter said, “The boundless and immense divine love of the Triune God was expressed and shared outwardly toward all of creation and humanity. Out of his loving plan, God the Father created the world and human beings with his creative love” (SVD Generalate, 2018). Affirming life is not believing in life after death but promoting life before death (Amalados, 1996: 72). Affirming life is grounded in respecting oneself as well as others, the other forms of life: “To affirm human life is to affirm the human subject, who has freedom and who, while rooted in nature, can create a fuller life with richness and diversity.” (Amalados, 1996: 73).

When we affirm life, it cannot be as an individualist, for life itself is relational. Its connectivity gives richness and vibrancy to life itself. When our lives are connected with the Divine, they bloom. Being aware of the Divine in every human being and in nature gives substantial relational proximity to all living things. Affirming life leads to preserving life and going against the permissiveness of abortion and other debates. These are proliferating now, and people want to solve problems by taking away life in the womb. Pope Francis said recently regarding abortion debates in the USA, “Is it right to hire a hitman to solve a problem?” Life is the gift from God and whatever form it may be in, it has to be respected. In a similar way, life in nature needs affirmation. Nature is the creation of God; it is not to be abused or subjugated. We must live in such a way that nature is cultivated to give glory to God. A lot of work has to be done by us in preserving and respecting nature.

### **3.2 THE EXPERIENCE OF COMMUNAL LIFE**

A human is born into a community and grows in it, but the community has to be constantly built up. People lose senses of community due to the overuse of social media, individualism and seeking personal glory. Human egoism and love for power and money are the obstacles to building a community. This egoism has been further strengthened by modern stress on individualism and competition. Any consideration for the other is seen as a unique objective of pursuing power and profit. Thus, the

culture of individualism and anonymity grow (Amaldos, 1996: 73). The so-called corporate culture owes loyalty not to the other, but to the company; thus the sense of community is lost. Personal glory, ego and power proliferate.

In a globalized world, the postmodern exults in the sphere of individualism. Community orientations shift out of context. Human existence has meaning when it is relational. In relating with others, humanity finds support and growth. Joy multiplies when it is shared with others; by making others happy, one's own happiness doubles. Otherwise individual happiness will run dry. In this understanding, learning and respecting other cultures and peoples, "Johannine (the Gospel of John) 'love ethic' has the potential to transcend the cultural barriers and to transform communities transnationally and transculturally. Thus, John remains a flexible poetic example to visualize societies globegnomically" (Thomaskutty, 2015: 67). Transforming the local context with the periscope of John is an exercise that will lead to transforming the global context. The Catholic Church from its very beginning has maintained the qualities of becoming both local and global at the same time.

Experience of love in a local community is like a spring flowing into a river. Domination of any type in a community will hamper its growth and experience of God. Especially, one has to tackle the masculine domination in society. Oppression of women in society is related to culture, customs and traditions. This has to be changed when one wants to build a just society. Equality in everything is not the prime issue; more important are aggressive and exploitative attitudes and behaviors that enable subjugation of women for personal greed, not respecting the rights and dignity of women by exploiting them. Creating equal opportunities in society is a mission today. God may be evoked through the growth of an ethical Christian community in which everyone is created in the image and likeness of God.

### **3.3 AN AWARENESS OF TRANSCENDENCE**

Transcendence describes something so excellent that it is beyond the range of human understanding. God is transcendent with and in us. Jesus came into the world and revealed God, and since that moment always invites us to follow him to know God fully (Jn14:7). Thus, when we have the experience of Lord Jesus Christ, we have the experience of God; but we cannot grasp him/her fully. There remains the immanent and transcendent nature which makes up the mystery of God.

It is not that God is incomprehensible, for we experience his/her goodness and kindness. Believing that the Transcendent is present in directing the cosmos brings us to search for the Divine and always yearn for his/her power and goodness (Amalados, 1996 : 75). Transcendental meditation carries people to a higher consciousness. Something transcendent surpasses reality into super awesomeness in a world all its own. It moves you.

Secularization is one of the consequences of modernity. In so far as this keeps some religious institutions from dominating others, this is welcome. But when secularism

does away with God, the image of the Divine, it is dangerous. In the secularization process, everything seems oriented towards enjoying life, enjoying freedom and making personal decisions without being aware of the presence of God in life. When God seems to be an obstacle for their decisions and freedom, this leads to anarchism.

In recent years one speaks about the need for a global ethic. Ethics somehow remains merely at a secular level. We should rather explore the possibilities of a global quest for spirituality rooted in the experience of the Divine or of the Transcendent. We should seek to go beyond agreeing upon some common human values that we wish to promote. I do not think that we can move towards a better world if we keep God out of it. Religions, despite their differences and tensions, must play an active role. They should and will of course motivate and inspire their own followers. But beyond that they should create an atmosphere that takes seriously the Transcendence in the cosmos.

In this postmodern world, alerting people to the Transcendent nature of God is an imperative. Everything cannot be known by experiments. The power of the Divine plays a vital role in our lives and this idea has to be preserved in our day-to-day activities. Searching, believing and discerning the Divine in our life is very significant for our peaceful growth.

### **3.4 MISSION AMONG THE POOR**

Asia has two poles: religion and poverty. People are poor in Asia. Poverty has many causes. The poor are chronic victims of exploitation in a postmodern society. Poverty often evokes our compassion, but it does not provoke indignation. It evokes pity but not empathy; it prompts us to donate, but not to show solidarity. Religion plays a vital role in Asia. Whether one follows an organized religious tradition or unorganized religious tradition, religious values are everywhere. The church must take poverty and religiosity seriously. Religious values provide tools to overcome poverty. Charity based in religious faith have different dimensions than an NGO's.

God is on the side of victims. This is the center of the Biblical revelation. "Every violation of personal dignity of the human being cries out in vengeance to God and is an offense against the creator of the individual" (*ChristifidelesLaici* 461, EG 213). The poor, the marginalized, the excluded and the unwanted in society were the center of Jesus' mission. He encountered lepers (Lk17:11-19), the blind (Mt 12:22), the dumb (Mt 9:32-33), suffering women (Lk 8:43-48) and socially excluded people (Mk 9:14-21, Mk 16:9). He healed them all and gave them dignity and showed them that God loved them.

Preference for the poor in the work of the church is not because the poor are more virtuous than others, but because God takes the side of the poor precisely because they are poor, helpless and victims. They cry out to God and God listens to their cries. They are God's favorites; but at the same time, the poor need to rely on God, listening to and seeking His will to restore themselves as human beings by showing love to

their neighbors and building solidarity with others in treating others as fellow human beings. Being poor is not a passport to heaven but a footpath to what the Lord expects of them.

Pope Francis says, “Without the preferential option for the poor, ‘the proclamation of the Gospel, which is itself the prime form of charity, risks being misunderstood or submerged by the ocean of words which daily engulfs us in today’s society of mass communications’” (EG 199). Working with the poor is an imperative today in Asia. Together with the poor, we work for their liberation from poverty. Liberative mission involves working for rights and dignity, involving strategic planning and execution.

### 3.5 BUILDING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNITIES

To respond to postmodernism, building intercultural communities is not just another option, but it is the way of doing mission work. Due to globalization, countries are becoming more intercultural. At the same time, in the political arena, there are more right-wing groups promoting narrow nationalist ideologies and ignoring others. This is dangerous to society. Exclusion promotes discrimination, oppression and infighting.

Intercultural living is an opportunity, but it is also a challenge and requires determination. The church has to commit itself to build intercultural communities. It is important that “the challenges associated with intercultural living don’t become taboos, otherwise it may cause great tensions and escalations over time (Clever, 2021: 123). Intercultural sensitivity has to be developed. It is not natural, and its appropriation needs special attention and efforts. Intercultural living has to be consciously created, intentionally promoted, carefully cared for and attentively nurtured. Community members in a village or town need to be aware of the need to build intercultural communities and move away from their xenophobic nationalism. Learning intercultural dynamics help individuals respect and honor other cultures and peoples.

In this context, creatively globalizing *multipolarity* calls for striving to create a constructive harmony among people of various cultural, religious and political poles. This needs a pragmatic approach free of prejudice, hierarchy or triumphalism. People matter the most, and creative ways of unifying is a challenging task. Another approach to build community could be to adopt *transversality*, which calls for the skillful encounter of peoples and of forces. The church has to grapple with these ideas and methods to build communities, and that is our mission today.

For building an intercultural community, members have to develop certain knowledge and skills in intercultural communication and intercultural competence. Placing priority on building intercultural communities would pave grounds for a peaceful atmosphere and healthy global society.

### **3.6 BUILDING INTERRELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES**

The church has three clear objectives in interreligious dialogue: (1) “To develop a deep respect for people of other religions and their respective traditions without any discrimination; (2) To safeguard the integrity of the Christian faith; (3) To continue to do the *missio Dei* because, understood as a method and means to mutual knowledge and enrichment. Dialogue is not in opposition to the mission *ad gentes*; indeed it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions.

In Asia, interreligious dialogue plays a big role in promoting mission. Over the years, we have pursued interreligious dialogue, but oftentimes we have not seen much result. In fact, in the coming decades of the twenty-first century, the church’s promotion of interreligious dialogue may be one of its greatest mission services in a world that may very well resort to confrontation and violence if it is not handled properly. Egoistic political powers and fundamentalism are real hurdles to this process. Finding amicable solutions through dialogue is the only way, at times prophetic. The church has promoted interreligious dialogue with a lot of patience, and everyone needs to continue to promote this. Here, one recognizes the presence of the Divine, the presence of the Holy Spirit and the power of love.

In an Asian context, the reign of God cannot evolve with one religion. Building community with justice, peace, joy and unity has to evolve with dialogue and interaction with other religions and faiths. “Mission is possible only when we are able to delight in the distinctiveness of the other.” (Arulampalam, 2015: 95). In this process, dialogue, respect and mutual interactions are necessary. Interreligious dialogue should lead to building interreligious communities where the Divine can be experienced and where peace and harmony can sustainably dwell. Samartha speaks of a three-fold purpose of interreligious dialogue: (a) to remove ignorance and misconception of each other’s beliefs and practices and to promote better understanding between people of different faiths; (b) to cooperate for common purposes where human rights, social and economic justice, and peace in the community are concerned; (c) and to bring to bear the deeper resources of religions on basic problems of human beings that arise because of human vulnerabilities which makes the question of transcendence strikingly relevant in an increasingly technological society (Samartha, 1991: 47-53; see Arulampalam, 2015: 96).

The various Bishops’ conferences in Asia and Oceania promote building interreligious human communities; however, many times, this is left to specialists for discussion. Language riddled with tokenism is exchanged between religions; the real dialogue has to break the ice. The productivity of dialogue depends on local realities, evolving ideologies and the influence of leaders. But the church has to pursue this constantly in all spheres, promoting dialogue with clear strategies. The act of building interreligious communities is a long process and needs constant attention.

### 3.7 THE PROPHETIC ROLE OF THE CHURCH

Prophecy is not another image of mission, but the meaning of mission itself. The prophetic aspect or thrust makes every activity a “mission.” This aspect points to the qualitative rather than the quantitative aspect (Amalados, 1994: 71). Prophecy is to speak in the name of God and in the name of the poor, to challenge unjust persons and structures, and to call for unity in seeking the will of God. “The missionary is therefore not someone who gives something that others do not have, but someone who conveys a call from God and facilitates response from the people, thus provoking growth in God-experience” (Amalados, p.71). Prophecy questions unjust systems, raises the issues of the people and shows alternatives to the people in the light of the Word of God.

We need to confront the situation in various parts of Asia and Oceania, and this is an uphill task. Here, the prophetic role has great significance. We must act without fear, and only tell the truth in public with certain assertions and convictions. Knud Jørgensen says, “One key consequence is to present our faith in the room of public truth, and not just as a private affair.... our faith must  *dwell in the story of God’s activity as we know it from Scripture and from God’s continued revealing himself in our history.*” Thus, prophetic roles in public affairs will have consequences and one must be prepared to face them.

The context of Asia calls for the prophetic role of the church. “The prophetic service of the church is the logical sequence to its call and mandate to follow its Lord (Kavunkal, 2011: 241), who identified himself as prophet (Mk 6:4, Mt 13:57; Lk 4:24).” Along with this, we need dialogue; otherwise, the prophetic nature will not bear fruit. Dialogue is not just to talk or the act of relating with others, but rather the act of listening and understanding others’ perspectives. This is done with respect and love for one another. Prophetic dialogue, which the Society of the Divine has assumed as a paradigm for mission, is gaining ground. Many theologians and missiologists see this paradigm as very vital for mission. Prophetic dialogue is the way to move forward to liberate, to educate and to show the way that God is love and he/she loves everyone (See Bevans and Schroeder, 2005: 348-395).

#### ***Prophetic Diakonia***

God’s mission is related to service to others. Service is witnessed through deeds. Diakonia is a gift and a manifestation of love for human beings: “While *Diakonia* begins as unconditional service to the neighbor in need, it leads inevitably to social changes that restore, reform and transform as well as challenges the structural injustices for which God calls prophetic witness by all God’s people.”

Prophetic *diakonia* is an essential aspect of prophetic witness and the love for neighbors through concrete assistance. It means to work for their rights, dignity and justice. This calls for standing firmly with the poor, the oppressed, the neglected Tribals and Dalits, and the marginalized. Reaching out to the poor would entail not just kindness and feeding, but validations of their identity showing them a future where justice,

peace and joy will prevail. Here, the prophetic ministries are significant, combining prayer and witnessing, and organizing people to live their human values fully: this so they understand the presence of the Divine and his love for them. Asian churches need to re-envision their approaches, methodologies and practices in the local context from the perspective of prophetic *diakonia*.

While prioritizing prophetic *diakonia* in our approach, one must take into account the situation of sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults in the Church. Pope Francis repeatedly addressed this important issue and said, “I encourage you to listen to the cry of the victims...” and continuously insisted that justice be done to for victims with zero tolerance for perpetrators as the dictum. The local church has to address this concern and not hide or protect perpetrators in the name of culture, shame or power (Paresa, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

Postmodern society is complex; it has some good elements to offer, and at the same time it has negative impacts on the lifestyles in society. When we see how God’s love could permeate in all the segments of society, we need a deeper analysis of today’s society, especially post-truth society. The mission of the church in this context assumes multiple aspects. Value of human life and community are significant in this process.

We might rephrase Martin Luther King Jr.’s axiom on injustice and say instead: A disregard for truth anywhere is a threat to truth everywhere. Indeed, just as Christ remained silent in response to Pilate’s final question, the truth to which we bear witness is a *Person* who stands before us, who exists and insists on being known. The realities of modern rational thought are a mere shadow of the *Logos-Made-Flesh*. It is a truth which, though never contrary to fact, can be made known in the hearts of women and men by revelation alone and cannot be contained or conveyed entirely by human thought. Neither can it be deconstructed or devalued by the *postmodern* critique. It is not a mere set of ideals or a philosophy or a definition which can be debunked or tossed aside and it is not reason but revelation. In our society, we do not believe in returning to a modern or Enlightenment sense of understanding of fact and truth. Rather, a new way is opened afresh for the experience and encounter Jesus who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn 14:6). We show the way Jesus can be discovered. Paul Lakeland would argue, “the theological tradition and the postmodern world must meet; and while the initiative for this meeting lies in the traditions’ sense of mission, the language to be used is very definitely that of the world” (Lakeland, 1997: xiv). Our mission is to show the way, to share the Good News, to point out to others the Master and to historicize the love of God. This means full engagement with others to work for liberation, freedom and unity. Given the volatile situation of fundamentalism in some countries and political anarchy, the mission of the church faces many challenges; however, collective and coherent living and action would make us relevant in the world.

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