

EMBRACING  
VULNERABILITY  
ON THE SYNODAL  
JOURNEY



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## Vulnerability as a missionary

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### Introduction

Vulnerability is a fundamental quality of every authentic Christian mission, because we are called to follow Christ, *'who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave....'* (Phil. 2:6-8). The *Kenosis* of Christ makes *vulnerability a way of being missionary* and an important means for mission. The dictionary explains vulnerability as *being exposed to the possibility of attack or hurt, either physically or emotionally*. The vulnerability of Christ was not imposed; it is a condition He willingly assumed, from his birth in the manger as a defenceless baby to his death on the Cross as a common criminal. I invite us to hold in our minds any of the numerous ICONS of the vulnerable Christ as I share this reflection.

I approach this reflection by considering two aspects of vulnerability as experienced by missionaries. The first is what I call *vulnerability from above*, which I define as the decision to empty oneself of the power and honour which one legitimately possesses; it contradicts our innate desire to hold on to power, to dominate and to be triumphant. The second, which I name, *vulnerability from below*, is an invitation to embrace our human condition in its woundedness, fragility, limitations, sinfulness, and imperfections. While the experience of the pandemic brought the fragility of the human family close to everyone, we can only transform the pain brought by the pandemic when together we learn to embrace both forms of vulnerability. The first is something we have to *let go of* in order to follow the *Kenosis* of Christ, while the second is a reality imposed on us by our human condition which we learn *to embrace for transformation*.

I would like to share these two levels of vulnerability in my own life as a woman, consecrated for Mission *ad gentes ad extra*. This implies a geographical movement to lands and peoples of other cultures. It also implies a movement to the existential periphery, as enunciated by Pope Francis in *Evangelium Gaudium*, inviting the Church to go forth to all the human peripheries where people suffer exclusion and experience different forms of dehumanizing hardships as a result of economic inequality and impoverishment, social injustice and environmental degradation<sup>1</sup>. This mission *ad gentes* from the existential perspective is an urgent call for us all as Consecrated people in today's world.

Pope Francis' call to the Synodal Process is ultimately a renewed call to mission, but not from the hitherto held position of power and authority. It is an invitation to *a Synodal Church in communion, participation and mission*. This cannot be achieved without accepting and embracing our vulnerability. For us as missionaries, vulnerability is an asset for mission, rather than a burden; because it permits us to enter into the human reality more deeply through our own participation in what is weak, oppressed and poor. When we embrace our own vulnerability, we become closer to the people in need of light and liberation. Perhaps the most exigent journey for us as missionary-disciples is not the physical distance we cover, but the inner journey towards letting go of our securities and embracing our own vulnerabilities. We are not master builders as Oscar Romero puts it, and we are wounded healers according to Henri Nouwen.

### **The New Springtime of Mission – Reciprocity**

The request I received was to speak on *Vulnerability as a Missionary*, specifically from an African perspective. I am grateful to the organisers of UISG Plenary for including Africa, a continent which until quite recently was considered to be ONLY at the receiving end of the missionary thrust of the Church. My missionary journey has been greatly enriched by the diversity of cultures and realities in Nigeria, my country of origin, as well as in Argentina, my country of mission, where I lived for eleven years. I have also been marked by my study and interaction in Europe. I seize the opportunity to thank my Congregation, the Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles for giving me the opportunities to fulfil my missionary dream beyond my wildest imagination!

Africa is sometimes called the 'garden of the Church in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century', because of the fascinating growth of the Church in the African continent the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This golden era of Christianity in Africa is manifested in many ways, and the most palpable is the increase in the number of Christians and Church institutions; for example, from an estimated 4 million professing Christianity in 1900, African Christianity has grown to over 300 million adherents by the year 2000.<sup>2</sup>

One of the implications of this is that there are no longer exclusively mission sending countries or exclusively mission receiving countries; we all give and receive, in mutuality. This change

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<sup>1</sup> Two documents extensively treat this perspective of Mission: in *Evangelium Gaudium* (2013) and *Laudato Si* (2015). These two documents set the tone of Francis' Pontificate.

<sup>2</sup> Baur, John, 2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African History, Nairobi 2009; De Gruchy, John, The Church Struggle in South Africa, London 2005; Gray, Richard, Black Christians and White Missionaries, New Haven 1990; Groves, Charles P., The Planting of Christianity in Africa, London 1958; Hastings, Adrian, The Church in Africa, 1450–1950, Oxford 1994; Isichei, Elizabeth, A History of Christianity in Africa, London 1995; Sanneh, Lamin, West African Christianity: The Religious Impact, London 1983; Shaw, Mark, The Kingdom of God in Africa: a short history of African Christianity, Grand Rapids 1996.

affects the power dynamic, since we all are vulnerable in one aspect or the other. The geography of mission has changed! Thanks be to God, Christian mission is now divorced from its historical link to colonization and westernization. The past three decades have been particularly eventful in this regard, especially with the ground breaking missionary document, *Redemptoris Missio* by St. Pope John Paul II in 1990. Quoting the Latin American Bishops in Puebla, John Paul reinforced this new vision of mission whereby all peoples and all local Churches, even from the poorer nations, are called and encouraged to respond to the specific missionary vocation *ad gentes, ad extra - projected beyond frontiers. The Latin American Bishops affirmed: although we have need of missionaries ourselves, nevertheless we must give from our own poverty*<sup>3</sup>.

This assertion re-echoed by John Paul, definitely gave energy to missionaries from Africa and I imagine from the entire southern hemisphere to respond to the missionary vocation with generosity. I have often been asked why Africans would bother going outside their continent as missionaries with the myriads of problems we have. To this I respond that the call to mission is NOT a rivalry of self-sufficiency, to which only those who are strong and have no problems can respond. This exclusive tendency is problematic because it associates mission with power, political influence, material wealth, colonization and domination. As an African missionary I see myself called to change this narrative, to bring newness, simplicity and energy stripped of economic and political powers.

I know many of us would disagree with me that we are living a *new springtime of mission*, because many of us are having dwindling and aging members. But remember I am writing from an African perspective! We are just beginning to spring up!! For example, in the past year, my Congregation opened two new missions, one in Liberia and the other in Central African Republic; they are both international and intercultural communities of Sisters coming from Togo, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Ghana and Nigeria. For us mission *inter-gentes* <sup>4</sup>is just beginning, with its beauty and challenges.

### **Becoming aware of my own vulnerability**

While vulnerability is vital for mission, it does not come easy. The missionaries I grew up to know in my childhood, were not considered vulnerable men and women. My missionary vocation was inspired by the Irish missionaries who in my homeland, pioneered initiatives in education, health, pastoral and social frontiers, they were loved and highly respected. However, my notion of being that heroic missionary admired by all suddenly crashed! When I stepped out of Africa in 1994, I realized that I was not received as a missionary; rather, I was considered a migrant worker who had come looking for a better life. My desire for total self-giving was shaken when I was often hit with the fact that it is believed that an African has little to offer. I realized that for many outside Africa, the continent was only associated with poverty, war, violence, disorder, primitive life, diseases, ethnic wars, political unrest, and corruption. While these realities cannot be denied, Africa is also a land of promise, for its

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<sup>3</sup> Ioannes Paulus PP. II, *Redemptoris Missio* - On the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate, 1990.12.07, No 64.

<sup>4</sup> The "*missio inter-gentes*" which was developed by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) is a missionary approach, applicable in every context, which sees the "gentes" not as the object of our effort to convert, but as "guests" to whom we can offer hospitality and "friends" who can, in time, welcome us and offer us friendship. 'inter' means among other cultures and religious. It is a missionary approach which needs to be further explored in African missiology.

vibrant life, its resilience, youthfulness, love of community, hospitality, generosity, and religiosity. As a missionary from Africa, I learnt to embrace this vulnerability which prejudices impose on me, while I humbly assume the dignity to change the narrative. We are all victims of *the single story syndrome*, built on the biases of others about us. We all carry the burden of our identities and this become more apparent when we step outside our own milieu, we are affected by the judgment of others. The Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie beautiful articulated it: *It is not that the single story is not true, but it is not the only story*<sup>5</sup>. As missionaries, we have to learn to embrace our vulnerability by not building on the prejudices of the popular press and by remaining comfortable with both the lights and shadows of who are.

Today, with the proliferation of the media, people are quick to remind us of the dark side of our own history as Church. For example, our conformity with four hundred years of Slave Trade, some alliance with colonisation, our silence on racial discrimination and apartheid, our tolerance of unjust structures and our own cover-up with injustices and abuses within our system. All these weaken our power of witness and make us vulnerable when we set out to be the moral voice in the world.

### **Instances of Missionary Vulnerability – African Perspective**

Being a missionary today is about our openness to work with others to build a new humanity, missionaries are men and women of communion. Our tendencies as Church to hold on to our positions and scorn other people's contributions had to give way to the recognition of the truths of others. Mission today is *inter-gentes* – among the people of other faiths and cultures, it is a renewed call to listen to others with respect and not with arrogant self-deceit. These are some of the situations which make us more vulnerable today:

- **The space of 'Nothingness'** – In the effort to adapt to the circumstances of mission, there is a period of transition which involves emotional, psychological, social and sometimes physical and language adaptation. At the entry point to a new mission, one has to let go of the past (this may include affective and professional status) and embrace a new reality. A missionary is like a child who has to learn in an unfamiliar environment with many uncertainties. These movements from the known reality where we are in control to the unknown where we are dependent make us vulnerable and require a lot of humility, but which ultimately can transform us as Jonah was transformed after his mission to the Ninevites.
- **Lack of missionary antecedents:** Coming from Africa, many of us are probably the first generation of missionaries from our communities. The expectations are not clear and in many cases, our missionary models come from other cultures. We have the difficult task of setting up structures which can support and sustain our missionary vocation – giving and receiving. We find ourselves writing a new script, walking uncharted paths and sometimes ill equipped for the task. For example, there are few missionary preparatory, renewal, and sabbatical programmes which take African reality into consideration. This has prompted some international Congregations to set up some renewal centres in Africa<sup>6</sup>. African missiology is not quite developed to respond to emerging challenges. We use western models which place non-Europeans at a

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en)

<sup>6</sup> Inter-Congregational On-Going Formation Programme (ICOF) is one of these initiatives. Set up by 5 Congregations, website: <http://icofprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Arusha-2019-registration-form.doc>

disadvantage, because we cross double cultural barriers - the western culture and the host culture.

- **Missionaries today are a vulnerable minority:** In the past decades, religious and missionaries in areas of primary evangelization were a major force in the society. They were respected for their contributions to education, health and empowerment of all forms. In many cases, they determined the standards, set the rules and laid down acceptable norms, sometimes with little regard for the local cultures. Today, in almost every part of the world, missionaries are minorities, we are like remnants within the society, whether Europeans in Africa, Asia, the Pacific or in the Americas, or Africans in other continents. Today, there are anti-Christian and sometimes xenophobic tendencies, which partly target missionaries. With reduced numbers, missionaries are an endangered species.
- **Insecurity and Violence:** The ongoing violence and global security has increased the vulnerability of missionaries who often fall victims of kidnapping, torture and gruesome murder; the experience of dear Sr. Gloria, a Colombian Franciscan missionary who was held hostage in Mali for over 4 years is still fresh in our minds. Hundreds of thousands of missionaries of all races are living in areas of high risk, which often present the difficult decision of either quitting the mission or remaining in danger. According to the Vatican Catholic News Agency, twenty-two Catholic missionaries were killed around the world in 2021, half of them in Africa<sup>7</sup> (Those murdered include missionaries of other continents working in Africa). The same report stated that from 2000 to 2020, 536 missionaries were killed worldwide. Religious and lay missionaries and pastoral workers are often killed not just because of hatred for religious, but for various political and economic reasons, for example, criminals in search of non-existent treasures or attracted by the mirage of easy redemptions or to silence uncomfortable voices. It is truly challenging to discern the appropriate response to negotiations with the criminals. The difficult choice not to passively submit to the evil regime, while we uphold nonviolence principles, is a moral dilemma which makes us more vulnerable, and violent people continue to flex their evil power.
- **Funding Challenges:** Financial unsustainability of many missionary projects was made more apparent during the pandemic due to reduced foreign and local funding. The concern for sustainability creates tension between the service to the poor and income generating projects. The charisms of many Congregations suffer on the altar of having projects which are self-sustaining. This financial dependence denies missionaries the freedom to discern and choose projects which truly respond to their charism, *as 'he who pays the piper...dictates the tune'*.
- **Prophetic Vulnerability:** As prophets, we sometimes must ruffle the status quo and question the abuse of power by the political and sometimes religious leaders. The unjust socio-political, cultural and economic systems in most African countries may be rooted in their own cultural practices, but there were also those installed or reinforced by the colonial systems whose main aim was to subdue the masses. We have governments and sometimes local Churches that do not share the pain of its people, lacking in compassion and sensitivity. We as religious are often guilty of abuse of power and spiritual abuse of the faith and trust of our people; in this situation we require the self-emptying of Christ to let go of our privileges and embrace prophetic vulnerability.

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<sup>7</sup> Alejandro Bermudez, Denver Newsroom, Dec 30, 2021 - catholicnewsagency.com/news/249997/vatican-agency-reveals-number-of-missionaries-murdered-around-the-world-during-2021

- **The interface between African culture and Christianity:** There are many areas of convergence between the African cultures and Christianity, but there also areas of tension which require continuous discernment. For example, the African culture places much emphasis on respect of elders and submissiveness to authority. This may lead to abusive relationship when leaders may become dictatorial and insensitive. Since children and youth do not speak in front of elders, African leaders may have more difficulty listening and allowing themselves to be challenged by those they are called to serve. Similarly, this may reduce the voice of women and the less influential persons into a silent murmur and sometimes a groan for life. We are not alone in this struggle, it is the way our Church has operated for centuries and African culture is very much at home in this structure. This may be the reason why the call for a synodal Church would require many layers of reflection in the African reality.

## Conclusion

This reflection will conclude with the *ICON of Jesus and the Samaritan woman*. According to the American Protestant Old Testament scholar and theologian, Walter Bruggeman, the story of Jesus's encounter with the Samaritan woman is an encounter between two vulnerable persons. The story opens with the two persons in a situation of need and emptiness. *Jesus was in a situation of vulnerability*, with more explicit needs: he was hungry, thirsty with no jug to draw water, tired from his long journey and a stranger in need of some help (Jn.4:6). The *woman's need and emptiness were more implicit*, but were gradually uncovered in her encounter with Jesus as the story unfolded.

By embracing his own vulnerability, Jesus led the Samaritan woman to a journey of a new discovery of her deepest and real desires. She became capable of recognizing the long awaited Messiah and was energized to share her new experience with others. In Walter Bruggeman's interpretation of the mission of Christ, this encounter highlights a major approach of Jesus' ministry, *'the radical criticism is about self-giving emptiness, about dominion through loss of dominion, and about fullness coming only by self-emptying'*<sup>8</sup> This scene concurs with the prophetic imagination of Jesus in his affirming solidarity characterised by helplessness and vulnerability, especially with the people at the margins of the society.

In this episode, Jesus teaches us once again the importance of vulnerability not only as an ideal for spiritual life, but also as a tool for mission. As missionaries, as we cross boundaries of countries, cultures and languages, we become more keenly aware of the light and shadows of our own cultures and those of others. We are all vulnerable before a human history that classifies us as victims and villains, oppressed and oppressors, rich and poor, civilized and uncivilized, etc. As missionaries, we are called to build communion in this diversity embracing its beauty and fragility. As I draw this reflection to a close, I challenge myself and each one of us to embrace our own vulnerability. My own vulnerability as a woman within a patriarchal society and Church, an African in a world of global power tussles, a religious in a world of growing religious indifference and intolerance, a missionary in a xenophobic world and one called to the periphery in a world where only the centre matters. This for me is embracing vulnerability from above and from below.

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Second Edition), Fortress Press, 2001, 151 pages.

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