

The New Way of Being Church – an Authentic Path to the Vatican II Ecclesial Spirituality as projected in the FABC V Vision of the New Way of Being Church

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1. Introduction.....	2
2. The Present and the Path Ahead	2
3. Three Dimensions of Communion	3
<i>3.1. Communion with God</i>	<i>3</i>
1.1.1. The Word and Eucharist Centred Spirituality	3
3.1.2. Call to be Holy	5
<i>3.2. Communion with the Whole Humanity.....</i>	<i>6</i>
3.2.1. Call to Become Neighbours.....	6
3.2.2. Equality in Dignity of the Children of God.....	7
3.2.3. Importance of the Sacrament of Baptism	8
<i>3.3. Communion with the Whole Universe</i>	<i>8</i>
3.3.1. Spiritual Childhood.....	8
4. Three Characteristics of Communion	9
<i>4.1. Proactive Communion.....</i>	<i>9</i>
4.1.1. The Role of the Church in Reconciliation	10
<i>4.2. Self-emptying Communion.....</i>	<i>10</i>
4.2.1. Spirituality of Little Things.....	11
4.2.2. Leaders to Carry the Burdens of the People of God	12
4.2.3. Spirituality of Transparency	14
4.2.4. Spirituality of Suffering	15
<i>4.3. Witnessing Communion</i>	<i>15</i>
4.3.1. The Challenge to become the Change we want to see in the World.....	15
4.3.2. Sharing in the Universal Salvific Mission	16
4.3.3. Spirituality of Harmonisation	18
5. Deepening the Spirituality for the New Way of Being Church.....	18
6. Marian Spirituality.....	19
7. Conclusion	19
8. Questions for Discussion:	20

1. Introduction

Pope Paul VI, in his opening address at the Second Session of the Second Vatican Council in 1964 stated: “The Church is mystery. It is really imbued with the hidden presence of God. It lies therefore within the very nature of the Church to be always open to new and even greater exploration”. A close look at the Bandung Statement would reveal that the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, in fact, did explore various aspects of the nature of the Church and arrived at some practical steps. Half a century has passed after the end of the Council and a quarter of a century after the Bandung FABC Meeting. There is still a long way to go in actualising these dynamic visions of the Church leaders.

Transition from a mere desire to determination is not an easy one. In Mk 10:17-27 we read about a rich young man who ran to Jesus driven by a desire to attain eternal life. Jesus asked him to convert his race of desire into a race of determination. This required action. “Go, sell what you own and give the money to the poor”. In fact, this is the story of the Asian Church and more particularly of the Indian Church. The desire of the Indian Church is, indeed, praiseworthy. The desire of the Asian bishops was expressed in the Bandung Statement: to become a communion of communities. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India and many church leaders shared this desire. Time and again Jesus helped us to reflect on the implications of turning this desire into determination. Twenty-five years after that event, today we are reflecting on how far we have succeeded in converting that race of desire into a race of determination. Whenever there is a determination to do good, God inevitably comes to our aid. One of the fundamental demands of the New Way of being Church is to have a solid spirituality to sustain it.

In the Holy Bible we find many models of the Church like People of God, Bride of Christ, Temple of the Holy Spirit, Body of Christ, Flock of Christ, Vineyard of the Lord etc. In its attempt to understand the mystery of the Church, Vatican II dealt with some of these biblical images. Every one of these images presents some aspects of the mystery of the Church. It is a fact that we find a gap between the real images that our communities actually manifest today and the Biblical images. These Biblical images presuppose a Biblical Spirituality. SCC is an endeavour to actualise the Biblical ideals of the community of Jesus’ disciples. The Challenge of the Small Christian Communities is to become the kind of communities of disciples that Jesus wants them to be.

2. The Present and the Path Ahead

What the Second Vatican Council intended and what the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences planned to actualise was not some cosmetic change, but a paradigm shift in the understanding and outlook regarding the Church. The SCCs are the tool that our great leaders envisaged for the Ever New Way of Being Church. The toils of our dedicated animators have not been in vain. The Lord has made the plant grow. I consider it a joy to find that 43.22% of our SCCs understand themselves as concrete expressions of the Church according to the latest survey. 53.39% of them understand carrying on the Mission of Christ as the basic purpose of SCCs. 59.32% of those involved in SCCs understand a leader as the servant and animator of the community. Almost 50% of our SCCs have Gospel Sharing leading to activities in the neighbourhood. Our communities have grown considerably in solidarity, unity and in the sense of the presence of the Kingdom. There is a great awareness among the lay people about their role in the Church and about their

baptismal commitment. There has been a growing spirit of service in the community.

Yet, the survey also reveals that we have to go a long way in interreligious dialogue and harmony, involvement of the priests and religious in SCCs and in the area of prayerful discernment process. One of the findings that draw our immediate and urgent attention is the poor involvement of the youth and children in SCC meetings. Christian spirituality has to penetrate the entire life of every section of the Church. We need to pay attention to the concern of the Almighty: “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). This is the right time to advocate a strong spirituality for our SCCs to ensure continued growth, sustainability and fruit-bearing. In what follows in this paper I am trying to highlight some important aspects of a strong Spirituality for the SCCs which can make our journey steady and purposeful.

3. Three Dimensions of Communion

3.1. Communion with God

1.1.1. The Word and Eucharist Centred Spirituality

Jesus demands Worship in Spirit and in truth (cf. Jn 4:23). From its very beginning, the Church has been a community bound by the Holy Spirit in to the Body of Christ. The early Church was a community called together by the Lord and engaged in the common task of preaching the good news. They prayed and broke the bread together in the Lord’s name. They endured persecutions from time to time from Roman authorities.

Pope Benedict XVI says, “The Church's deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (*kerygma-martyria*), celebrating the sacraments (*leitourgia*), and exercising the ministry of charity (*diakonia*). These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable. For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being.”¹

Sacrosanctum Concilium 7 instructs us about the fourfold presence of Jesus during the Liturgy, namely in the minister, in the Eucharistic Species, in the Word of God and in the worshipping Community. It is important for us meet Jesus in all these ways. The Bandung Statement elaborates how this can be done. SCCs experience and bear witness to the fact that Christ is alive and active in them ‘here’ and ‘now’ in the community of believers. The SCC should not diminish in to a group merely saying prayers. The Proclamation of the Word of God should be an essential part of the SCC meetings and there has to be reflection and contemplation on the Word of God. The Church is a community called out by God. During the SCC meetings, the community of believers receives from God directions, guidance and corrections. God often directs us to meet Him in the needy.

On the other hand, the Small Christian Community should always resist the temptation to deteriorate in to a mere organisation for social or charitable activities. We should never forget that it is the Word of God shared in the community that “moves the believer to make his or her life a gift for others in charity”². The action is the result of the Word that is heard, accepted, meditated upon and personalised in

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Deus Caritas est*, 25.

² Pope Benedict XVI, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, no.87.

the context of a community and a neighbourhood. Hence discernment is an essential aspect of SCCs. Discernment is an identifying mark of the Spirituality of the SCCs. This aspect takes precedence over others because proactiveness and self-emptying proceed from discernment. Thus we say: SCCs are Discerning, Proactive and Self-emptying Communities.

It is significant that the Christian communion is called “the way” in the Scripture.³ It is the new way. The beauty of this way is that there is either the new way or no way, for the Christian way has to be inevitably ever new. When it ceases to be new, it ceases to be the Christian way. It is the Spirit who is encountered in the Word and in the Eucharist who makes this community ever new.

The bishops of the FABC envisaged a Christocentric Spirituality for the SCCs. The fact that Christ is the centre gives it its soul. We cannot afford to ignore the first commandment while following the second. The first is the most important and the second flows from the first. Here again, we need to pay attention to the fact that while speaking about the love of neighbour the Old Testament has the clause ‘as yourself’, the renewed teaching of the New Testament has a perfected clause “as I have loved you” (Jn 15:22). This makes the challenge even greater and wider.

St. James in his letter clarifies that faith without works is dead (cf. Jam 2:17). SCCs believe in this principle. Without tasks by which the community reaches out to the needy, SCCs are dead. The inspiration and strength for such activities are derived from the Word and the Eucharist. The Second Vatican Council teaches us: the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows”⁴.

St. Francis of Assisi said, “What does the poor man do at the rich man’s door, the sick man in the presence of his physician, the thirsty man at a limpid stream? What they do, I do before the Eucharistic God. I pray. I adore. I love.” Mother Teresa of Kolkata used to say, “Unless we believe and see Jesus in the appearance of bread on the altar, we will not be able to see him in the distressing disguise of the poor.” These are statements of those who lived the Gospel with great love for God and His People. They had taken the twin challenge of authentic Christian spirituality seriously – love of God and love of neighbour. Jesus is clear: “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (Jn 6:53). Without the Eucharist we will be lifeless, our communities will be lifeless. There is a great animating power in the Eucharist. If the Eucharistic celebration remains a mere ritual act without touching life, our SCCs cannot be expected to be creative and spontaneous. We need an active and dynamic spirituality of the Eucharist to be able to have vibrant SCCs. The Spirituality of the SCCs flows from the parish Eucharistic table and finds its fulfilment at the parish liturgy.

The reason for the Apostles to stay on with Jesus even when all others had deserted Him was that they believed that Jesus had the unique words of everlasting life (cf. Jn 6:68). Jesus wants his disciples to live on “every word that comes from the mouth of God”(Mt 4:4). We need to feed on the Word of God. Interiorisation of the Word and its personalisation are very essential for SCCs. To my mind, St. Joseph is a model for us. He was a father to Jesus by the Word, not by blood. The Word shared in the SCCs makes us neighbours, brothers and sisters to everyone on the face of the earth. This universal outgoing love is expressed by the believers in their neighbourhood. This foundation of the SCCs needs to be further strengthened. The

³ Cf. Acts 9:2; 18:25; 19:9; 19:23; 22:4; 24:14; 24:22. We need to read these passages in connection with Jn 14:6.

⁴ Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 10.

Word of God is essentially alive and active. In the SCCs the Word of God is alive through the life, words and deeds of the members.

We need to cultivate the Spirituality of the Beloved Disciple. It is important to be a disciple who loves Jesus and His people. It is through this that the people will know that we are disciples of Christ. But in the SCCs we should not miss the experience of the disciple who constantly experiences 'being loved' by Christ. It is the fulfilment and realisation of the words of Jesus 'I have called you friends' (Jn 15:15). At the last supper Jesus says, "You call me master and Lord; that is what I am". In turn, we should be able to say to Jesus, "You call me friend; that is what I am". *Dei Verbum* 2 presents God as one who tries to establish a friendship with women and men of our world.

A sound combination of Active contemplation and contemplated activity seems to be the ideal. This is what Peter and John as well as Martha and Mary teach us. An over emphasis on activities can be dangerous.⁵

3.1.2. Call to be Holy

The Council teaches us: "in the Church, everyone whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness"⁶. At the heart of the Christian Spirituality is the call to be holy. "... As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Pet 1:15-16; Lev 11:44-45, 19:2). Growing in holiness is growing in relationship with God, practically expressed in our relationship with others. The main thrust of the Book of Leviticus is holiness required of the people of God. "For I am the Lord your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy" (Lev 11:44). The statement "be holy, for I am holy" is repeated in various books of the Bible. Jesus says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect"(Mt 5:48; see also 1 Pet 1:16). Holiness is an experience of oneness with God. This oneness with God is impossible without oneness with the humanity. In 1 Jn 4:20-21, we read, "Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." We need a community to be holy, to practise holiness, to exercise holiness and to manifest holiness. The SCCs provide the ambience for this. Small Christian Communities are platforms to practise holiness.

In Jer 7, the Lord tells Jeremiah to proclaim to those rushing in to the Jerusalem Temple to worship, "Amend your ways and your doings and let me dwell with you" (Jer 7:3). Temple is not so much the residence of God, where God passively resides, but it is the place we encounter the living God. A Small Christian Community is temple where people encounter the living God. The community has to travel the path of constant renewal for them to continue to have Jesus among them.

⁵ On August 20, 2006 on the feast of St. Bernard, Benedict XVI warned the faithful of the danger of falling into "hardness of heart" as a result of excessive daily occupations. Addressing a large number of people gathered in the courtyard of the papal summer residence of Castel Gandolfo to pray the Angelus, the Pope suggested that prayer and contemplation take precedence in the "surge" of daily life. He cited St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153), a doctor of the Church as an example of one who knew how to balance prayer with activity. The Holy Father referred to a letter written by St. Bernard to Pope Eugene III in which the saint said, "See where these accursed occupations can lead you, if you continue to lose yourself in them -- without leaving anything of yourself for yourself." Our SCCs should learn to balance reflection and action.

⁶ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 39.

3.2. Communion with the Whole Humanity

3.2.1. Call to Become Neighbours

In Gen 3:8 we find God coming down to walk with Adam and Eve. It should not be taken as an isolated event that took place only once, nor should it be seen as an act of a disciplinarian God coming to punish the humans who sinned. It is natural for God to walk with man. That is precisely why he created him in his own 'image' and 'likeness'. Until he sinned, it was also natural for man to walk with God. After committing sin, man finds it difficult to walk with or even face God. Yet God looks for him and invites him "Where are you?" (Gen 3:9). God asks the man who moves away from his brother, "Where is your brother Abel? (Gen 4:9)" Cain found it difficult to understand that all of us are keepers of our brothers and sisters. According to the teaching of Jesus, I am incomplete without my brothers and sisters. I am whole only with my brothers and sisters. This wholeness is essential to holiness. The Church is the way where we walk with our brothers and sisters in the presence of our loving God.

"It is not good for man to be alone" (Gen 2:18) is not simply a statement about marital life of spouses alone. In the larger perspective, it is an essential truth about authentic human life. Man is basically a community-being. His being is realised in relationships. Being alone questions his very being, created in the image and likeness of the Trinitarian God. Man is really man only in a community.

SCCs are neighbourhood communities. More than that, they are communities whose members are challenged to become neighbours to everyone. In the corporate mentality, membership is often meant for selfish advantage. In the Church, Jesus envisages not mere membership, but active relationships. Pope Francis says, "No one is saved alone, as an isolated individual, but God attracts us looking at the complex web of relationships that take place in the human community. God enters into this dynamic, this participation in the web of human relationships."⁷

In the context of the Communion Ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, we cannot speak of Spirituality without reference to relationships. It involves both horizontal and vertical relationships. The Ten Commandments are summarised in two but never losing sight of these two inevitable dimensions of God and neighbour. For Jesus, the significant question is not "Who is your Neighbour?" but "Who proves himself / herself to be a neighbour?" We are all called upon to become neighbours. Neighbour is one who is near. We need to be near to the needy. We cannot turn a deaf ear to the people who suffer due to exploitation and injustice. We become neighbour to them by listening to their cry and extending a helping hand to them. SCCs are to become communities of people who constantly try hard to become neighbours to others. The spirituality of any Christian community should include this invitation to bridge the gap between us and the needy through a proactive love and concern as the good Samaritan shows us, crossing the barriers of caste, creed, gender, language and race.

At the foundation of the willingness to share one's wealth and resources - both material and spiritual - is the awareness that whatever one is and has is a gift of God and that we are children of the same God, consequently brothers and sisters. "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" (1 Cor 4:7) Jesus tells, "You received without payment; give without

⁷ Interview by Fr. Antonio Spadaro, the Editor in Chief of the Italian Jesuit Journal, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, on 19th August 2013.

payment” (Mt 10:8). In fact, we are only stewards of God’s goods and resources. This invites us to adopt a Spirituality of Stewardship which enables us to share our goods with others.

The Small Christian Communities are to be considerate to the poor and should be concerned about poverty. Regarding the early Christian community, the Scripture says, “There was not a needy person among them”(Acts 4:34) The SCCs should do everything possible to abolish poverty in the neighbourhood. As these communities mature into what Jesus would want them to become, they are called to embrace evangelical poverty and become a Church of the poor resembling the Son of man who emptied himself to become the poorest of the poor. Pope Francis says, “Oh, how I wish for a Church that is poor and for the poor!”⁸ A wealthy Church cannot bear witness to the treasure in heaven or the providence of God. Simple life-style and less possessions are indicators of the docility to the Holy Spirit. Extravagance, neglect of the poor, waste and ecological pollution are all grave sins of our times. The Catholic Church may be doing a lot for the poor. Yet it is often felt that the Church can do much more for the poor. Have we cared for the poor as Jesus would want us to? In many places there is an unbridled rush to possess more and more and build more and more. Following the example of Jesus who became poor for our sake, we need to become poor for the sake of the poor. This is an inescapable challenge of the *kenosis* demanded by Jesus.

3.2.2. Equality in Dignity of the Children of God

In line with the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the Bandung Statement envisages fundamental equality of all the baptised. The clergy, religious and the laity have to work together in partnership and mutuality in the Church believing in the equality in dignity of all the baptised. Mutual respect and mutual support are called for. Respect for one another makes us transparent and accountable. A community provides a platform for this.

To be a leader is not a favour or privilege, but a greater responsibility involving risk. Those in authority are equally under the justice of God (cf. Wis 6:1-11). The Scripture even says, “severe judgement falls on those in high places. For the lowliest may be pardoned in mercy, but the mighty will be mightily tested. For the Lord of all will not stand in awe of anyone, or show deference to greatness; because he himself made both small and great, and he takes thought for all alike. But a strict inquiry is in store for the mighty.” (Wis 6:5-8) The Church in India needs to overcome clericalism and for this concrete measures are to be taken. According to the Second Vatican Council, “The laity derive the right and duty to the apostolate from their union with Christ the head; incorporated into Christ's Mystical Body through Baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through Confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord Himself.”⁹

Practice of equality demands that we prevent exploitation of anyone in the society. Hence SCCs are to ensure that women and children are not exploited. SCCs also should make concerted efforts to end all types of discrimination in the name of caste, class, colour, race, language etc. Pope Francis insists on the equality of men and women.¹⁰

⁸ Pope Francis, *Address to Representatives of Communications Media*, Paul VI Audience Hall, 11 March 2013.

⁹ Vatican II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 3.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *General Audience, Saint Peter's Square, Wednesday, 29 April 2015*: “The Christian seed at the root of equality between spouses must bear new fruit today. The witness of the

Dignity of the children of God inevitably includes the dignity of families. Today many questions are being raised about the sanctity and dignity of marriage and family. There is a tendency to consider marriage as a convenient alliance with selfish motives. Many countries have legalised same sex marriages. There does not seem to be any space given to God and revelation while reflecting about families. Small Christian Communities have to be concerned about nurturing families and fostering the divine purpose of marriage.

3.2.3. Importance of the Sacrament of Baptism

The Council shifted the emphasis from the ministerial priesthood of ordained ministers to the common priesthood of all believers and placed ministerial priesthood within and at the service of common priesthood. The Council then proceeded to speak of equality in dignity of all the baptised. The Council taught:

... the chosen People of God is one: "one Lord, one faith, one baptism"⁽¹⁹²⁾; sharing a common dignity as members from their regeneration in Christ, having the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection; possessing in common one salvation, one hope and one undivided charity. There is, therefore, in Christ and in the Church no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex, because "there is neither Jew nor Greek: there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female. For you are all 'one' in Christ Jesus"¹¹.

3.3. Communion with the Whole Universe

According to the general perception, one of the focal points of Small Christian Communities is communion among the believers in Christ. Pope Francis extends the area of this communion when he advocates a spirituality "not dissociated from the body or from nature or from worldly realities, but lived in and with them, in communion with all that surrounds us"¹². The global warming and subsequent danger cannot be ignored. Pope Francis calls believers to an "ecological conversion", whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them"¹³. This, according to him, is not an optional but essential aspect of Christian Spirituality. Hence the spirituality of communion that our Small Christian communities have adopted needs to be ecological too. Pope Francis says, "More than in ideas or concepts as such, I am interested in how such a spirituality can motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of our world"¹⁴. Destruction and manipulation of created realities question the wisdom of the of the Creator and can turn out to be very dangerous.

3.3.1. Spiritual Childhood

Jesus in the Bible wants us to adopt a spirituality of a little child. Children live in a world of awe, wonder and admiration. They easily learn new ways. They get reconciled without any effort. They care so much for nature and living things. They want to love and be loved. Children are eager to be held and led. They crave to be loved and touched and expect to be taught and shaped. Their minds are

social dignity of marriage shall become persuasive precisely in this way, the way of a testimony which attracts, the way of reciprocity between them, of complementarity between them. For this reason, as Christians, we must become more demanding in this regard. For example: firmly support the right to equal pay for equal work; why is it taken for granted that women should earn less than men? No! They have the same rights. This disparity is an absolute disgrace!"

¹¹ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 32.

¹² Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter: Laudato Si*, 216.

¹³ Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter: Laudato Si*, 217.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter: Laudato Si*, 216.

characterised by curiosity and eagerness are devoid of pretensions. They are energetic, imaginative and creative. They own receptive and believing hearts.

In comparison to our eternal life to which we are initiated on this earth, our earthly life is very short. This short life on earth is our initial stage of existence. Death is not a cessation of life, but a passage to eternal life. In that sense we can say that when we speak of our eternal life, our whole life on earth can be seen as the earliest part of our childhood. Although childhood is characterised by simplicity, it is very hard to maintain this simplicity as we grow up.

I strongly believe that what happened at the Second Vatican Council was an effort to simply recover this spirituality of a child - wondering at the mystery of God and of his Church, to perceive that every human being shares in this childhood before the Almighty Father. Simply put, the Second Vatican Council discovered that religion is not meant to control but to nurture human beings. The Church is a community of people who journey together with Jesus. They keep listening to him for guidance on the way. He not only guides, but also feeds them.

Discernment is an expression of our willingness to be taught and shaped by God. In the family of God we the children have a common wisdom, a common journey and a common experience. The renewal initiated at the Second Vatican Council is the result of the humility of the Church to unitedly seek the Lord wherever He can be found and to be open to accept His goodness wherever it manifests itself.

4. Three Characteristics of Communion

One of the inspiring concepts that led to the emergence of Small Christian Communities is that the Church is a Communion of Communities after the model of the Holy Trinity. All that most people probably know about the Bandung Statement may also be merely the phrase “communion of communities”.

Our God is a communion of Love. God is love. If God is love, He cannot but be perfect love. This love necessitates that God be Trinity. It is this love that makes the three persons one. Thus God is God in a community. Human beings cannot offer perfect love to God. Only God can offer perfect love. In the Trinity, we have God offering perfect love and God reciprocating with perfect love. When Jesus tells us “Love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12), he is giving us this perfect love as our model. It is important to understand two qualities of this love. God is, in fact, a Proactive, Self-emptying and Witnessing Communion of Love. This is the understanding that I propose as the basis of an adequate spirituality for small Christian communities. He loved us first and so he is ‘proactive’. He gives us Himself in love, thereby his love is self-emptying. He reveals Himself, thereby His love is a witnessing love. The Church is a Proactive, Self-emptying Communion of Communities after the model of the Trinitarian Communion. Small Christian Communities are called upon to become Proactive, Self-emptying and Witnessing Communion of Love.

The three adjectives that we have used need to be understood properly for the Small Christian Communities to become aware of their own vocation.

4.1. Proactive Communion

The adjective ‘proactive’ suggests creativity and spontaneity in the life and ministry of Small Christian Communities. Our communities have to be pioneering, always finding new paths. Our communities must dare to travel in the rough sea of storms as well as to climb the mountain of solitude. This presupposes discernment.

Creativity and novelty in our ministry will be proofs of a constant process of discernment.

4.1.1. The Role of the Church in Reconciliation

In 1959, while revealing his intention to call a Council, Pope John XXIII had extended an “cordial invitation to the faithful of the separated communities to participate with us in this quest for unity and peace, for which so many long in all parts of the world”. This expressed the spirit of Reconciliation that the Council very much desired. The teachings of Jesus were intended to reconcile the humanity to God and to one another. The decrees on Ecumenism and Non-Christian Religions followed. It was an initiation of a large eventual process of Reconciliation the council envisaged.

Jesus came to reconcile the world to God. One of the proactive roles of the SCCs which continue the mission of Christ is that of reconciliation. In a world of divisions and disparities, the role of the Church in reconciliation has to be realised in the Small Christian Communities. The best act of reconciliation is forgiveness. Every minister of reconciliation should be ready to forgive and to beg forgiveness. Pope Francis Says, “A man and a woman who consecrate their lives to the Lord, but don’t know how to forgive, are worth nothing”¹⁵. From the part of the Church, at times it may be enough to remain at the door actively awaiting the return of the prodigal son / daughter. Sometimes it is necessary to go out and look for the lost sheep. There are also times when we should spare no effort in finding the lost as the woman in the parable of the lost coin did. It is discernment that enables us to make the right choice. This is a ministry that brings joy to heaven (cf. Lk 15:7, 10, 24, 32). Reconciliation results in a celebration in heaven.

Our SCCs have an enormous task of reconciliation. Ministry of Reconciliation is perhaps a call of the time. This ministry has to be first carried out within the Church and then extend to others. Pope Francis, speaking in an interview to Fr. Antonio Spadaro, the Editor in Chief of the Italian Jesuit Journal, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, on 19th August 2013 says, “I see clearly that the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds.... And you have to start from the ground up.” Jesus came to reconcile us to God and to one another. We continue this very same mission. Our world today suffers from hatred and narrow-mindedness. That is why communalism and terrorism are thriving in our world. We have countries, communities and individuals hating one another. Some wars are fought in the battle grounds, while others are fought in the media or legal courts. It is in this context the SCCs have to explore the area of reconciliation.

In our attempt to be proactive, we should guard ourselves from disciplinarianism, ritualism and legalism while following the path of reconciliation.

4.2. Self-emptying Communion

The adjective ‘self-emptying’ suggests that the Small Christian Communities have to minister not only until it hurts, but continue to minister even while being hurt. The Acts of the Apostles tells us that even persecutions did not stop the

¹⁵http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/06/06/francis_off_the_cuff_to_men_and_women_religious_in_sarajevo/1149705, as accessed on 9th June 2015.

Apostles from their ministry (cf. Act 4:13-20; 8:4; 11:19) Small Christian Community is not a club that gives us some task to do at our leisure, but its tasks proceed from the very nature of the community. Without these tasks the community cannot be named 'Christian'. Here a question arises. Does real discernment take place in our SCCs or do we simply choose from a readymade list of good works – visiting the sick, cleaning the church, arranging the Sunday Liturgy etc. A Small Christian Community is always on the Cross with Christ breaking itself, giving itself. The Cross gives it the right to be called 'Christian'. There is great wisdom in what Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen used to say, "Love is a mutual self-giving which ends in self-recovery".

Service that does not cost anything is not Christian service. Jesus was tempted to turn stones in to bread for himself; he overcame that temptation and turned his own body into bread for others. A Christian service should involve self-sacrifice. The Small Christian Communities have to take this aspect of service into account when they decide about the tasks to be taken up. The tasks taken at the Gospel sharing should involve self-sacrifice. We are called upon to break ourselves to become food for others.

The Small Christian Communities should never forget the opening verse of *Gaudium et Spes*: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."¹⁶ A spirituality or life style that insulates and anaesthetizes us against pain and agony of our fellow-beings is a dangerous one.

4.2.1. Spirituality of Little Things

Christianity offers a spirituality of the little way and little things. However much we may rise up we should never grow tired of small little ways of mercy. God cared for Elijah when he was hungry and commanded crows to supply him with food (cf. 1 Kgs 17:4). The widow of Zarephath was under the loving eyes of God and he provided for her and for her son (cf. 1 Kgs 17:7-16). While being accompanied by a huge crowd that admired him, Jesus did not miss the short man sitting on the Sycamore tree, but stopped to chat with him (cf. Lk 19:1-10). He found time to chat with a Samaritan woman who had probably become the subject of gossip in the village (cf. Jn 4:1-42). Jesus noticed the paralysed man who felt that he had no one for long 38 years and healed him (cf. Jn 5:1-18). Even during his final agony on the cross, he reaches out to the good thief with the gift of salvation (cf. Lk 23:39-43).

Jesus always found time for small people. No one went unnoticed in his sight. He saw the poor widow putting in two coins into the treasury of the temple (cf. Mk 12:41-44). He found time to interact with children and bless them (cf. Mt 19:13-15). He found time to watch the lilies of the field and birds of the air (cf. Mt 6:26-29). He took note of the woman who was bent for 18 years and 'called her over' after a session of preaching in the synagogue and healed her (cf. Lk 13:10-13).

The tasks undertaken by the SCCs should always choose to interact directly with the needy and the poor. It is not so much the budgetary provision that we make for the poor that counts, but the quality of our love for the poor that counts. One of the drawbacks of the majestic institutional structures of the church today is that they sometimes prevent us from doing little things for God's people. Our policies and discipline may not always allow us to reach out to the real people in need. Many who are lying half dead on the margins of our society find us passing by to accomplish

¹⁶ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* 1.

great projects. Jesus broke the institutional discipline when it was found to be detrimental to communitarian life. He cured the sick even on Sabbath. He did not bother to follow the rules of ablutions and traditions of the elders when they had nothing to contribute to community life.

Jesus could have healed the sick just by a word, but he wilfully touched them – many of them labelled as untouchables. The woman who was impure due to a flow of blood touched him. He looked for her not to reprimand her, but to admire her faith that prompted her to rush to the salvation that was near (cf. Mk 5: 25-34). He touched the leper who was supposed to stay away covering the upper lip and shouting ‘unclean, unclean’ (cf. Mk 1:40-45; Lev 13:1-2, 44-46). Most of his acts were little acts of charity and mercy.

We should never miss the Lazarus at our door steps while we plan to eradicate poverty in the whole world, for the ‘whole world’ is unreal, but Lazarus is real. We should not fail to stop to talk to the Samaritan woman at the well when we travel to change the whole society. Jesus offered a full meal to the woman who was trying to gather the crumbs that fell from the master’s table (cf. Mt 15:21-28).

The test of real holiness of a Christian is in his/ her care for the little ones of God. We have clear proofs of this in the lives of great saints. Blessed Teresa of Kolkata was a woman who cared for small things and small people. Pope Francis making provisions for bathing and hair-cutting facilities in Vatican for the homeless in Rome and supplying them with umbrellas shows us the way to follow. Our Small Christian Communities should never lose sight of the small ways of sanctification. Our Small Communities should never ignore small people in the neighbourhood while dreaming of huge plans and programmes.

St. John advocates Love in Truth and Action (cf. 1 Jn 3:18). We are living in a culture which is being commercialised. We are more for advertising rather than making the product more authentic. This malady has been creeping into the Church. The number of souvenirs and leaflets that are printed year after year to make others know the great works we are doing in fact go against the principle of ‘charity in secret’ (cf. Mt 6:4-7). We have learned to tell people that we are loving rather than actually loving. Jesus said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35). The real love does not brag and parade (cf. 1 Cor 13:4).

4.2.2. Leaders to Carry the Burdens of the People of God

Sir 40:1 says, “Hard work was created for everyone, and a heavy yoke is laid on the children of Adam, from the day they come forth from their mother’s womb until the day they return to the mother of all the living”. Human beings carry heavy burden during their earthly life. God is not a mere spectator, but one who sustains and empowers them in their struggle. The Psalmist says, “Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved” (Ps 55:22). From time to time the Lord chooses and consecrates various persons to carry the burdens of His people.

In Chapter 11 of the Book of Numbers we read that the people of Israel were fed up with eating manna every day. They were nostalgic about the fish, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic which they used to enjoy in Egypt. They began to weep and say, “If only we had meat to eat!” (Num 11:4). This dissatisfaction of the people increased the burden of Moses. Moses was almost frustrated and he complained to God that the burden of the people of Israel was too heavy for him to carry. God offered to reduce the burden of Moses. How did He do

that? He took some of the Spirit that was on Moses and put it on seventy of the elders of Israel so that “they may bear the burden” of God’s people along with Moses.

The Consecrated Persons are to bear the burdens of God’s people. They are to care especially for those who carry heavy burdens. This ministry of carrying the burden of God’s people is a share in the ministry of Jesus who said, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28). This evidently suggests that consecrated persons should never increase the burdens of people but should be considerate and kind towards them. Regarding the scribes and the Pharisees, Jesus remarks: “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them” (Mt 23:4).

In the Council of Jerusalem, St. Peter questioned the members, “Why are you putting God to test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?” (Act 15:10) As a result the letter that the Apostles and leaders of the Church assembled in the Jerusalem Council sent to the Gentile believers read, “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose no further burden than these essentials ... ” (Act 15:28). Jesus cautioned his disciples: “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like one who serves” (Lk 22:25-26). St. Peter gives a clear advice to the elders: “I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock.” (1 Pet 5:1-2) It is here that the leaders of the Church should take every care to avoid ritualism, legalism, disciplinarianism and clericalism.

The Leaders who burden the subjects are not Christian leaders. When the people of Israel were asking for a king, through Prophet Samuel God warned them that the earthly leaders often burden the people rather than reducing the burdens of the people. The Prophet reported what the Lord said as follows:

These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. (1 Sam 8:11-17)

The Holy Bible records similar criticism of the Prophets of Israel¹⁷ and priests of Israel¹⁸. The bishops and priests in the Church in India, given the present

¹⁷ In Ezekiel 34:1-6, we read, “The word of the LORD came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.”

¹⁸ There is an account of the behaviour of priest-sons of Eli in 1 Sam 2:12-17: “Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels; they had no regard for the LORD or for the duties of the priests to the people. When anyone offered sacrifice, the priest’s servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a

situation carry out the kingly, prophetic and priestly ministries. In the whole process, there is a need to examine ourselves and see whether we have adopted leadership styles which put burdens on our people or which carry the burdens of the people. Pope Francis says,

The ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people's night, into the darkness, but without getting lost. The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials. The bishops, particularly, must be able to support the movements of God among their people with patience, so that no one is left behind. But they must also be able to accompany the flock that has a flair for finding new paths.¹⁹

Very often SCC is perceived as something meant solely for lay people. The priests and religious tend to keep away from Small Christian Communities. SCC calls for a rediscovered life-style for the entire people of God. The New Way of being Church should penetrate the administration of our dioceses and congregations, the working style of our commissions and offices, the functioning of our Associations and Committees. If such changes are not effected the SCCs will be suffocated to extinction. It is a way of living the Gospel on a daily basis. It is a Christian way of blooming wherever we are planted. It is in these communities that we should actually practice all that we speak about Christianity and the Gospel of Jesus.

I believe that there is a direct proportion between promotion of SCCs and the Animating Leadership style in the local Church. SCCs can hardly be established with dominating style of leadership. Priests, Kings and prophets are equally under the law of God like the ordinary people. An animating humble proactive leadership is what is called for.

In a Church that promotes Small Christian Communities, leadership is humble stewardship. In this context, many of the activities carried out by priests and nuns today are mere administrative works and can be done even more effectively by our lay people. In Act 6:2 we read that the twelve called the whole community and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the Word of God in order to wait on table. We should be able to identify people "of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" who can share the burdens of administration.

4.2.3. Spirituality of Transparency

Transparency aims at challenging one another to excel. In all educated societies, there is a temptation to filter conversations with care so as to avoid hurt to others. While this can be pleasing and appeasing there is a danger of missing the essence of the content of the message while communication seems to be fascinating. St. Paul says, "But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love" (Eph 4:15-16). Like Jesus who turned

three-pronged fork in his hand, and he would thrust it into the pan, or kettle, or caldron, or pot; all that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there. Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest's servant would come and say to the one who was sacrificing, "Give meat for the priest to roast; for he will not accept boiled meat from you, but only raw." And if the man said to him, "Let them burn the fat first, and then take whatever you wish," he would say, "No, you must give it now; if not, I will take it by force." Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the LORD; for they treated the offerings of the LORD with contempt."

¹⁹ Interview by Fr. Antonio Spadaro, the Editor in Chief of the Italian Jesuit Journal, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, on 19th August 2013.

to the disciples and asked, “Do you also wish to go away?” (Jn 6:67), we need to learn to openly address issues. Prophetic and radical proclamation is the need of the hour. The prophetic intention would have been jeopardised if it were not for the words “You are the man” (2 Sam 12:7) and repentance of King David would not have been a reality. The Church today requires transparency at all levels. From the level of the families to the highest office in the Church, we all have to promote transparency. The Holy Father Pope Francis shows us the way. SCCs need to take inspiration from him. Truth frees and freedom is essential for proper growth. Hence regular evaluation done in the SCCs is to be promoted not as an administrative tool for order but as part of our duty to challenge one another to grow into the images of Christ.

4.2.4. Spirituality of Suffering

One of the most eloquent among the recent prophets of self-emptying service was Blessed Oscar Arnulfo Romero Galdamez. According to him, “A church that suffers no persecution but enjoys the privileges and support of the things of the earth – beware! – is not the true Church of Jesus Christ”²⁰. A mysterious aspect of the Ecclesial Body of Christ is that it has always been broken to be distributed in order to become food for the hungry just as the wheat is crushed and the grapes are pressed to become bread and wine.

Christianity is the most persecuted religion today. Our communities are increasingly challenged to respond to persecution. There is a Gospel way of approaching the reality of persecution. Total non-violence is what Jesus called for. Jesus says, “But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well”. (Mt 5:39-40) But he does not stop there. In Mt 5:44 Jesus says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”. In Lk 6:28, Jesus teaches us further, “bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you”.

We need to step out of the victim class and give up any martyr’s complex. Real martyrs do not exhibit a martyr’s complex, but are victors. This value too has to be inculcated at the level of the SCCs. We should neither anticipate the cross nor should we evade it when it really comes.

4.3. Witnessing Communion

4.3.1. The Challenge to become the Change we want to see in the World

The members of the FABC rightfully hoped that the SCCs would be a solution to the growing militant fundamentalism and religious fundamentalism and that they would try to eradicate the desire for profit and the desire for power which were seen by Pope John Paul II in his Encyclical “On Social Concerns” as the root causes of the problems all over the world. The Bandung Statement also intended to address the problem of “a new middle class which is highly consumeristic and competitive, and in general insensitive and indifferent to the overwhelming majority of poor and marginalized people” (Bandung Statement, no.2.1.6). Are the members of our SCCs convinced that “the Gospel is a leaven for liberation and for the transformation of society”? (cf. Bandung Statement, no.3.2.4)

Holy Father Pope Francis very often speaks about evangelisers having the smell of the sheep. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, he writes:

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

²⁰ “Oscar Arnulfo Romero Galdamez” in *Smart Companion India*, 6(2015)5, p.9.

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. An evangelizing community is also supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be. It is familiar with patient expectation and apostolic endurance.²¹

While we want to transform the Indian society, we shall be aware of the present day realities. We have politics characterised by large scale corruption. We have a society chasing materialism. The religious realm is contaminated with communalism and fundamentalism. The Media have not been free from manipulations and affiliations

Christian faithful are not merely devotees who would solely be busy with prayer, praise and admiration of the Lord. Instead they are called to be disciples who would follow Him on the way. They cannot remain mere spectators who admire him from a distance. Christian faithful are called to approach God and experience the communion that He offers and to be part of the communion that He is. This experience of communion is overwhelmingly proclamatory. Thus the disciples are those called to be transformed into leaven and to be sent out not only with the message but also with the essence of transformation. Following the Lord, they are to become the message themselves while confessing with their lips that Jesus Christ is Lord. St. Paul clarifies that those who want to be saved have to “believe in the heart” and “confess with the lips” (Rom 10:9). Practising this gospel, later he is able to say, “for me, to live is Christ” (Phil 1:21).

The Small Christian Communities envisaged by FABC bishops as communities serving fellow human beings with humility challenge us to become the way. It is a challenge to bridge the gap between the messenger and the message. When the messenger carries the message in his / her own very person, he / she becomes the message. The messenger who announces the New Way becomes the New Way. The example of St. Paul is evident. He moves from being a persecutor of the Church to the one who would say, “Be imitators of me as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11: 1). We have to become the way we want everyone to walk. The more we resemble Christ, the more we become the Way that He is.

According to the vision of the FABC Statement to proclaim Christ means “to be like him” and “to do his deeds by the power of his grace” (Bandung Statement, no.4.1.). The Asian Church was intended to be transformed into “a visible sign and instrument of unity and harmony” (Bandung Statement, no.4.2.).

The terms like ‘light’, ‘salt’ and ‘leaven’ used by Jesus to refer to the nature of life that his disciples should lead demand that our Small Christian Communities become the change we want to see in the world. In order to usher in the Kingdom of God we need to be different and outstanding in the world.

4.3.2. Sharing in the Universal Salvific Mission

Christ who is at the centre of the SCC is not simply a portrait, but a person alive and active – walking, talking, serving, correcting, consoling, leading and empowering. He is alive and is on a mission. In *Christifideles Laici*, Pope St. John Paul says, Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other, to the point that communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion.”²² He explains how it happens: “The sense of ecclesial communion, developing into a spirituality of communion,

²¹ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation: Evangelii Gaudium* 24.

²² St. John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation: Christifideles laici*, 32.

promotes a way of thinking, speaking and acting which enables the Church to grow in depth and extension. The life of communion in fact "becomes a sign for all the world and a compelling force that leads people to faith in Christ ... In this way communion leads to mission, and itself becomes mission"; indeed, "communion begets communion: in essence it is a communion that is missionary".²³ Our missionary nature demands that we facilitate an encounter between Jesus and the people. We need to bring Jesus to people and people to Jesus. The parents brought children to Jesus. Philip brought Nathanael to Jesus. Andrew introduced Jesus to Peter. The Samaritan woman told the villagers about Jesus. In *Pastores dabo vobis*, Pope John Paul II refers to the Mystery of the Church as "Mystery of Trinitarian Communion in Missionary Tension"²⁴. Every SCC needs to manifest this missionary dimension of the Church.

Salvation of all human beings is what is desired by the Heavenly Father through the incarnation of His only Son (cf. Jn 3:16). SCCs should make every attempt to share this concern of the Heavenly Father. Jesus was possessed by this universal salvific mission which he handed over to his disciples to carry on. Today, the Church being the Body of Christ shares this concern of Jesus. A believer is compelled to proclaim. When questioned by the Jewish leaders, Peter and John said, "... we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Act 4:20). *Ad Gentes* teaches us: "The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature"²⁵. SCC being the microcosm of the Church should thoroughly be involved in this mission and should function in collaboration with the entire Church in carrying out this mission. The believers are specially called to realise this universal mission in their neighbourhood. Therefore, SCC should have a spirituality which strengthens every individual believer, every family, every parish, every diocese and the universal Church – a comprehensive spirituality which enhances every realm of Christian life. Many questions arise. Do our SCCs deepen the faith and commitment of the individual Christians? Do they strengthen Christian families enabling them to see their sacred vocation and mission in the Church? Do our SCCs remain committed to the parish community and find their existence always within the parish community? Do our SCCs realise their roles with the diocesan Christian Community led by the bishop and the universal Communion under the shepherding of the Holy Father? A sound SCC has to have its answers to these questions in the affirmative.

In Jn 15:27, Jesus tells his disciples, "You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning". To be able to witness to Jesus we need to have been with Jesus. Before the disciples became witnesses they had stayed with Jesus. Quality time with Jesus is a prerequisite for us to become witnesses of Jesus. Gospel sharing is a time to stay with Jesus. The disciples on the way to Emmaus had Gospel sharing allowing Jesus to speak to them. In Act 1:21-22 we hear that when the disciples wanted someone to take the place of Judas, Peter highlighted the quality required of such a person saying, "one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus Christ went in and out among us beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us – one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection". Jesus, in fact, asks us to 'abide in' him (cf. Jn 15:4-7).

²³ St. John Paul, *Apostolic Exhortation: Vita Consecrata* 46.

²⁴ John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation: Pastores dabo vobis*, 12. Of course, this description of the Church was already explained in his earlier *Apostolic Exhortation: Christifidelis laici*.

²⁵ Vatican II, *Ad Gentes* 2.

4.3.3. Spirituality of Harmonisation

Jesus not only talks to us about the Kingdom of God but also indicates the method of accepting and preaching the Gospel. In the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew, we hear Jesus speaking about the Kingdom of God in many parables – the sower, the weeds, the mustard seed, the yeast, the treasure, the pearl and the net. After having taught his disciples in all these parables, like a good teacher he asked his listeners, “Have you understood all this?” (Mt 13:51) Like good listeners they answered in the affirmative. Then Jesus gave them some tips about good learning: “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of the household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Mt 13:52). The new does not demand that the old be thrown away. There is a need to bring together the old and the new. This harmonisation is to be very carefully done. Otherwise there can be a disaster. “No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.” (Mk 2:21-22) Jesus does not intend to destroy the old. That is why he clarifies, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil” (Mt 5:17). The care with which he handles the work even permits the wheat and the weeds to grow together until the end (cf. Mt 13:24-30). For many in Israel the new teachings became a stumbling stone (cf. Rom 9:31-33). St. Paul says that the stumbling need not necessarily end up in a fall (Rom 11:11). Yet Jesus is uncompromising when it comes to the teachings of the Kingdom. He says, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted” (Mt 15:13).

Small Christian communities are agents of evangelisation. It is thus clear that the method of evangelisation has to be one of harmonisation which respects and absorbs the old and the existing while bringing in the new and transforming leaven. The Letter to the Hebrews begins saying, “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways” (Heb 1:1). This is something that the small Christian communities have to painstakingly learn - to respect existing cultures and traditions. Small Christian communities should develop a spirituality of harmonisation characterised by tolerance, understanding, dialogue and inculturation while being zealous messengers of the Kingdom of God in their neighbourhood.

5. Deepening the Spirituality for the New Way of Being Church

Insisting on a Spirituality for the New Way of being Church is an assertion that doing without being has neither credibility nor witnessing value. If in some cases SCCs have been initiated with great apparent zeal and enthusiasm, but many of them have withered away in the course of time, one of the major reasons could be doing without being, attempting to minister without a spirituality. This reason is not so apparent. Only those who are able to go beyond what is apparent will be able to get to the root-cause of the failure in establishing and promoting SCCs. I consider this as the most serious reason for the failure of such SCCs. Our leaders and people have to get rooted in the New Spirituality. Otherwise we shall be doing a futile and foolish exercise of filling the new wine in the old wine skins. A strong spirituality is a must for SCCs. Many of our seminars in the days to come should be on Spirituality of the Small Christian Communities. Our formation system in the seminary and in other formation houses should necessarily be reworked in this line. This is easily

said than done. The promotion of SCCs is not less tedious than plantation of Chinese bamboos. It takes long years for the Chinese bamboos to spread the roots underground before any visible growth above the ground. Only a strong spirituality can generate convictions, commitment and patience.

I am wondering whether the SCC has, at least for some, turned out to be an end in itself. Have we forgotten that SCC is a tool for living the Gospel or have we ended up with treating the means as an end? When we struggle to establish Small Christian Communities, we are not simply aiming at a replacement of structures or creation of new structures, but we aim at a transformation of lives.

On 28th April 2015 Pope Francis wrote on twitter: “Every Christian community must be a welcoming home for those searching for God, for those searching for a brother or sister to listen to them”. Only when faith works through love a Christian community can become a home for everyone. St. Paul says, “the only thing that counts is faith working through love” (Gal 5:6). This is what is understood as bearing fruits. For Jesus, the branches have to be productive to be considered fit to be kept attached to the true vine.

6. Marian Spirituality

Mary, the mother of Jesus is a personification of the Church, a model of the Church and of every believer. She is the best model for Small Christian Communities too. She was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, kept the Word of God in her heart and pondered over it and rushed to share the Word in words of proclamation and deeds of service. Without the Holy Spirit the mystery of the Word will not be made known to us. There is twin need to “believe in the heart” and to “confess with the lips” before we can proclaim and witness to the Word. SCCs are called upon to do exactly what Mary did. She in herself represents the Church. She allows herself to be possessed by the Holy Spirit, ponders over the Word and puts the Word into action. This is also what the Church is expected to do. The Holy Spirit abiding in her leads her to discover the mysterious truths of the Word of God. It is important for the SCCs to have recourse to the intercession of Mary.²⁶

7. Conclusion

In spirituality too we can speak of an ever changing equilibrium. The Holy Spirit active in the Church constantly renews believing communities. Stagnation can never be seen as an aspect of any living thing. In our ever changing world the SCCs are the right platforms where the living Word can encounter actual situations of everyday life. The Spirit of the Living God enables our communities to encounter the Living Word in their life-situations. When our communities are docile to the Spirit, they are capable of living out and witnessing to the Trinitarian Communion. In short, an Adequate spirituality for SCCs is one which is capable of sustaining a sense of the mystery in themselves, where one perceives “the finger of God” (Lk 11:20) and experiences the advent of the kingdom of God.

²⁶ This should not be taken as advocating a replacement of Gospel Sharing with the recitation of the Holy Rosary in the SCC meetings.

8. Questions for Discussion:

1. How important is a sound spirituality for SCCs, for them to be sustained?
2. Has the Spirituality of the New Way of Being Church penetrated the day-to-day lives of our people? In what ways does it manifest itself?
3. Have our SCCs succeeded in sustaining a sense of mystery and wonder in their communities?
4. What are the ways of carrying out the Ministry of Reconciliation in our SCCs?
