

Re-imagining the Pathways of Our Common Vocational Journey

Some Orientations



SVD Publications
Generalate - Rome - 2010



**Re-imagining
the Pathways of Our
Common
Vocational Journey**
Some Orientations

**SVD Publications
Generalate - Rome - 2010**

Layout and Distribution: Sebastian Mattappallil
genpub08@gmail.com

Printed by GESP Italia, Città di Castello (PG)
February 2010

Contents

Foreword	5
1. Guiding Principles of SVD Formation Today	7
2. Rationale of the Project of Re-imagining	9
3. Changing Landscape of the Religious-missionary Call	11
3.1. New Understanding of Mission	11
3.2. Mission as Prophetic Dialogue	13
3.3. Missionary Response Marked by a Four-fold Family Traits	15
4. Emerging Challenges – Required Responses	17
4.1. The Call of the Formator	19
4.2. New Profile of the Candidates Who Join Us	20
4.3. Vowed Life in Present-day Context	20
4.4. Intercultural Living	22
4.5. Mission Partnership with the Laity	24
4.6. Academic Formation	25
4.7. Cultivating a Sense of Observation	26
4.8. Preferential Option for the Poor and Commitment to the Care of Creation	26
4.9. Direct Exposure to Real Missionary Situations	27
4.10. Critical Solidarity with Structures	27
4.11. Venturing into New Experiments	28
4.12. Ongoing Formation	28
5. Conclusion	29
References	31

Foreword

Dear Confreres,

I am happy to present this booklet entitled, “Re-imagining the Pathways of our Common Vocational Journey: Some Orientations”. This booklet is an attempt to update, in the light of the understanding of our mission today as Prophetic Dialogue, the General Principles of SVD Formation.

It will be remembered that the XIII General Chapter of 1988 had as its theme “Mission-Spirituality-Formation”. Document III of that chapter, entitled “SVD Formation Today”, laid out seven “Guiding Principles of SVD Formation” (cf. *Nuntius* XII, pp. 699-700). In reviewing the decisions of the XVI General Chapter of 2006, the general council felt that it would be a worthwhile project to work out similar guiding principles in the light of prophetic dialogue. These updated guiding principles of 2006 would then be considered as a supplement to the guiding principles of 1988.

In arriving at this decision, the general council was guided by No. 99 of the Statement of the last general chapter:

(99) **Program Renewal.** It is important to note that formation is not a mechanical program. It is a process of answering God’s call. All aspects of missionary life need to be implemented properly. Formation should provoke enthusiasm for the Reign of God, set us on fire for community life, and encourage a spirit of dialogue. Therefore, formation programs at all stages should be renewed in the light of witness to the Reign of God, prophetic dialogue and the characteristic dimensions (*IDW* 6, Sept 2006, p. 53).

The task of working out updated guiding principles of SVD Formation was entrusted to Fr. Thomas Malipurathu, the Secretary for Formation and Education. The present booklet is the result of that effort. It builds on a draft written by Fr. Malipurathu and later sent to some formators whose observations and comments were requested. The draft was reviewed and eventually revised in several meetings of the generalate and of the general council. I would, therefore, like to thank Fr. Malipurathu for his work and all the members of the generalate for their collaboration in this effort.

One should note the two important parts of the booklet – two parts equal in importance although unequal in length, namely: first, the attempt to re-think SVD Formation in the light of prophetic dialogue (the main text), and secondly, a summary of this re-thinking expressed in terms of 10 guiding principles of SVD Formation today (the section which opens the booklet).

The presentation of this booklet gives me the opportunity to sincerely thank all the formators in our Society who do the all important but often thankless task of guiding our candidates and young confreres in their vocational journey towards a life of sharing in the mission of the Divine Word. May this booklet be a recognition of their important role in the Society and an aid in their work of formation. May it assist them and all our formandi in realizing, in the context of the challenges of mission today, the goal of formation and education in the Society, namely: “growth by the power of the Holy Spirit into unity with the Incarnate Word of the Father and into a missionary community comprising members from many countries and cultures” (c. 501).

Fraternally in the Divine Word,

Antonio M. Pernia, SVD
Superior General

1. Guiding Principles of SVD Formation Today

1. SVD formation is a formation for mission. Its defining element is mission with Jesus the Divine Word and in the pattern of his mission. This mission we carry out as ordained ministers or as Brothers, both of which are equally dignified expressions of the same vocation.
2. Mission as prophetic dialogue means reaching out to our dialogue partners in solidarity, respect and love. It is important that the essential practical skills for participating in and promoting dialogue are acquired during the years of initial formation.
3. The four-fold Characteristic Dimensions or SVD “family traits” need to be consciously cultivated and constantly nurtured through appropriate learning processes.
4. The formator is called to be a model of dialogue. This requires that formation is carried out in a spirit of dialogue. Thus the task of the formator is journeying in community with the formandi in prayerful reflection, in living by Word and sacrament, and in direct contact with real missionary situations. Close accompaniment of the

formandi and constant supervision of their ministries are part of the process of this journeying.

5. Our vowed life takes on right meaning when we accept our vocation as a following of Jesus which involves taking up our cross on a daily basis and journeying in the footsteps of the Lord.
6. Harmonious living in inter-cultural communities is a way of practising prophetic dialogue. It renders more effective and appealing our witness to the inclusiveness of God's kingdom and its openness to diversity.
7. Being collaborators in *Missio Dei* implies that we join hands with the laity and recognize them as equal partners in this great enterprise.
8. Our academic pursuits require a distinctive missionary perspective. This implies the inclusion in our curricula of such topics as anthropology, sociology, missiology, studies of religion and culture, language learning, theory and skills of dialogue.
9. The years of initial formation should instil in us a firm conviction of the need for ongoing formation. From the beginning of our missionary life we should develop a sense of responsibility for our own continuing formation and assume it as a lifetime commitment.
10. Formation programmes need periodic review and reformulation.

2. Rationale of the Project of Re-imagining

General Chapter Statements in our Society are seen as the final fruit of a protracted process of extensive reflection involving its entire membership. An effort to consider from this perspective what the Statement of the 2006 (XVI) General Chapter says about formation is truly revealing. It reminds us in no uncertain terms that the decisive aim of formation is to instil in us an abiding enthusiasm for the Reign of God, to set us on fire for community life and to progressively nurture in us the spirit of dialogue. It then mandates that "...formation programmes at all stages should be renewed in the light of witness to the Reign of God, prophetic dialogue and the characteristic dimensions" (cf. IDW 6 # 99). The context clearly obliges us to interpret this mandate as the expression of our collective desire to keep our formation programmes consonant with the contemporary developments in the Church and in the world. The call is to ensure that our formation process is maintained in perpetual readiness to meet the challenges of our times, in line with the ancient goal of the Church itself to be an "*Ecclesia semper reformanda*" (= a perennially renewed Church).

Unlike some other institutes of consecrated life, our congregation does not have at the moment a common (i.e. intended for the whole Society) *Ratio Formationis* or *Ratio Institutionis*, a document normally intended to provide a comprehensive set of guidelines for the various stages of spiritual and academic formation of its members. We might recall that the 1988 (XIII) General Chapter took up formation as a topic for special consideration. The Statement resulting from that Chapter laid out certain basic guidelines for

formation and offered several recommendations for its streamlining at various levels (cf. FTW 1, pp. 63-79). Almost 18 years later, the 2006 General Chapter (XVI) again trained its focus on the question, especially looking at it from the perspective of the demands of the prophetic dialogue which we have accepted as the finest expression of our understanding of mission today. Reflecting on the obligations that the concept of mission as prophetic dialogue imposes on formation, the Chapter Statement articulates a call for the renewal of formation programmes. The present document is in essence a response to the Chapter Statement. It seeks to provide certain fundamental orientations to facilitate the task of keeping our formation process constantly renewed from within and to take into consideration the multiple dimensions of our missionary call, which is to be lived out in a post-modern world. It is not designed to function as a manual for daily consultation but to provide an ideological underpinning and a common vision to the superstructure of the formation process in our Society.

3.

Changing Landscape of the Religious-missionary Call

Today's dizzying pace of change really leaves no aspect of human life untouched. The effects of such change are felt both on the personal sphere of individuals and the structural sphere of social formations. Scientific development and technological breakthroughs have radically re-dimensioned our ways of thinking and our style of life. While changes can be psychologically unsettling especially on the short term, we also realize that all progress is inseparably linked to them. Such a perspective would be helpful when we try to assess new developments in theological thinking.

3.1. New Understanding of Mission

The indisputable starting point of any discussion on formation in our Society is that our formation is a formation for mission. But more importantly, it is a formation for mission **with Jesus the Divine Word** and **in the pattern of his mission**. This specification is significant because it emphasizes more who a missionary **is**, rather than what he **does**. Mission is our formation's defining element. Indeed, it has always been so. We might then ask, if mission is such a decisive element and it has always been an integral part of our philosophy of formation, where is the need for re-inventing? Here is the crux of the matter. The crucial point is that the understanding of mission has radically changed in the post-Conciliar era. "Paradigm shift" is the expression that is frequently

used in this context. It is perhaps true that it has somewhat lost its cutting-edge due to overuse. Yet it is still capable of emphasizing an important shift on the ideological plane¹. What the expression establishes is that intellectual and scientific advance consists of the displacement of one paradigm, which has become clearly incapable of explaining new or newly discovered facts, by a new paradigm, which does account for those facts in a more satisfactory manner.

Values such as the positive evaluation of other religions and cultures, the emphasis on the dignity of the human person, the spirited promotion of human rights, respectful interaction with the followers of other faith traditions, etc., – promoted by the influential documents of the Second Vatican Council – were potent stimulants for re-defining the mission of the Church. From the beginning of the Church’s existence men and women in their thousands have given their lives to the cause of mission. Most of them were inspiring models of committed faith and selfless service – especially to the poor and those in the margins of society. Many thousands willingly sacrificed their lives, courageously embracing martyrdom in defence of their faith. Yet, perhaps because of the theology prevalent at that time or because of a restricted worldview, for centuries the Church too often followed a “conquest” model of mission: conquering more and more peoples for Christ. In practice it meant transplanting a culturally Euro-centric institutional Church in other parts of the world. Missionary imagination was fired by the zeal for “saving souls”. Mission was geographically conditioned, seen as a movement from the “Christian centre” to the “pagan periphery”, from West to East, from North to South. Missionary personnel were often convinced that “pagan” cultures of the mission lands had to be “civilized” through the imposition of the Greco-Roman culture. The historical circumstances which established the unfortunate alliance between the colonial machinery and the missionary enterprise added a triumphalistic dimension

¹ Thomas Kuhn, the American philosopher of science, invented the expression and proposed it in his 1962 classic, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

to the whole effort. Supporting it was the exclusivist self-understanding of the Church, which often led to an expansionist agenda.

Through the providential mediation of Vatican II a new realization was introduced into this context. The old paradigm of mission was no longer adequate, and this led to the search for a new paradigm. The starting point of the emerging paradigm is the conviction that mission is fundamentally God's work and that it continues the witnessing to the Kingdom launched by the ministry of Jesus. Speaking of this new understanding of mission our Chapter Statement says: "The starting point of such renewal must always be the conviction that mission is first of all the work of God (RM 24) and that our calling is but a call to share in the mission of the Triune God" (IDW 1 #34). Its obvious corollary is that we understand ourselves as participants – or better still as God's partners – in this formidable project of God's mission (*Missio Dei*).

3.2. Mission as Prophetic Dialogue

Our interpretation of mission as prophetic dialogue is a consequence of this new paradigm. God's mission is eminently characterized by God's dialogue with humanity, and it starts with creation: "Creation itself is the beginning of the history of God's self-communication and saving action" (IDW 1 #35). That dialogue ceaselessly continued in history through the work of the Spirit and very specially through the life and ministry of the Son. "And so the Chapter identifies mission with prophetic dialogue, because dialogue is what fundamentally characterizes the *Missio Dei*" (R. Kisala, *Verbum SVD* 47 [2006], p. 333). It is in this continuum that we have to place our Chapter Statement's assertion that the "deepest and best understanding of mission" at the beginning of the third millennium is expressed in the term *prophetic dialogue* (IDW 1 # 53).

Although the expression "prophetic dialogue" can be described as SVD coinage, the idea of conceptualizing mission in terms of dialogue is of wider currency. We have to keep in mind that while

most of us instantly think of inter-religious dialogue at the mention of the word dialogue, since the 2000 General Chapter the Society attaches a much wider meaning to the concept. Inter-religious dialogue is obviously an important aspect of our mission. But “prophetic dialogue” is an icon that stands for the whole of our missionary outreach and every single aspect of it. It represents the very essence of our approach to mission. In arriving at this vision, we took a cue from the documents of Vatican II: “However, already in the Vatican II documents, the term ‘dialogue,’ in all its richness, is used in a wider meaning to describe our proper attitude toward and relationship with all people” (IDW 1 # 53). Clearer hints to such an approach are found in other subsequent Church documents, especially the documents of the FABC (Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences). What emerges from all these is that dialogue is an attitude of “solidarity, respect and love” (GS 3) that is to permeate all our activities.

Accepting this understanding of mission has many implications both for our way of thinking about mission and for doing mission. Indeed, it is when we take into consideration some of these implications that we become fully aware of the “paradigm-shift” that has occurred. Some of these implications linked to the various aspects of our religious-missionary life are listed in the 2006 Chapter Statement (IDW 6 #12-107). What is relevant to the present discussion is that in order to engage effectively in “prophetic dialogue” while committing ourselves to the four characteristic dimensions we need to open ourselves to a relentless process of learning. In biblical terms we can call it an attitude of continuous conversion (*metanoia*). It is not for nothing that the 2006 Chapter Statement articulates a “Call to Conversion” in each of the five important aspects of our life as Divine Word Missionaries: Spirituality, Community, Leadership, Finances and Formation (IDW 6 # 23-28; 41-46; 59-61; 75-76; 95-98). Precisely because the period of initial formation is the time that is meant to instil in us the fundamental conviction regarding the need for this continuous conversion, the new understanding of mission and formation become closely linked. To put it briefly, our formation process has

to be redesigned so that it becomes consonant with the demands of the new understanding of mission that “prophetic dialogue” represents.

It is true that the Church’s understanding of its mission is always evolving. Yet we can detect moments of ideological leaps that occur in this process. Thus the watershed event of the 2000 General Chapter was its three-fold answer to the question of what characterizes a Divine Word Missionary: 1) We give witness to the universality and diversity of the Reign of God 2) through a four-fold prophetic dialogue 3) marked by four characteristic dimensions of our missionary response (IDW 3 #4). When we speak about four-fold prophetic dialogue and identify four groups as our preferred dialogue partners – people who have no faith community and faith-seekers, the poor and the marginalized, people of other cultures and people of different religious traditions and secular ideologies – it does not mean we are excluding anyone from the purview of our missionary activity or focusing only on a few groups. “The four-fold prophetic dialogue...is meant to express the full range of activities that SVDs are engaged in throughout the world, and to offer a new way of looking at these activities – a sharing of faith and conviction done in an attitude of solidarity, respect and love – as a way of renewing our commitment to mission and answering the specific needs of the day” (Kisala, *Verbum SVD* 47 [2006] 329). Similarly, by identifying four aspects as our characteristic dimensions, we do not restrict ourselves to only selected activities. They are more like “family traits” or “marks” of SVD life and work (IDW 3 #8).

3.3. Missionary Response Marked by a Four-fold Family Traits

These “family traits” have to be imbibed and nurtured from the early days of formation. It is important to realize that “the characteristic dimensions are *characteristic* dimensions of our missionary life and service. They characterize the way we do mission and live the religious life. As such they are marks that

identify us as Divine Word missionaries” (A.M. Pernia, IDW 3, p. 7). Every SVD, no matter where he lives or what work he does, should become a “minister of the Word” (cf. Acts 6:4), so that devotion to the Bible becomes a distinguishing mark. Similarly, a Divine Word Missionary should pass on to everyone he interacts with the conviction that they, too, are equally partners in the mission of God. Again, the solicitude for justice, peace and the integrity of creation should become manifest through the words and lifestyle of an SVD. Then, starting with the primary realization that “Communication at its most profound level is the giving of self in love and consequently is a basic attitude necessary for us as Divine Word Missionaries” (c. 115), the appropriation of communications skills for fraternal living in communities and effective missionary outreach should become a goal of relentless pursuit. But what is crucial to remember is that these “marks” do not accrue to us through natural absorption or through a process of “osmosis” by merely living in an SVD house or community. They have to be consciously cultivated through appropriate learning processes and constantly nurtured. Formators and formandi need to recognize this and make it a priority. As a concrete measure, for instance, from the early stage of formation students should be introduced to the practice of *Lectio Divina* and other Bible-sharing methods by making them part of the regular spiritual exercises of the community. Similarly concrete programmes of exposure to the social and cultural realities of the immediate surroundings of the formation house should become a regular feature of the formandi’s activities. Such occurrences as days of national importance, cultural feasts, Mission Sunday, Earth Day, Environmental Day, etc., should be celebrated in our formation communities in an appropriate manner with relevant and meaningful rituals.

4. Emerging Challenges – Required Responses

When we assert that our mission is witnessing to the inclusiveness and diversity of the Reign of God through a four-fold dialogue, marked by four characteristic dimensions, it brings to the fore a number of new elements in our understanding of mission. Yet, inasmuch as our missionary response is a continuation of the mission of Jesus, it stands in clear continuity with the evangelizing mission which the Church has embraced from the beginning of its existence. Arguing along the same lines, when we say that our formation process has to be re-imagined so that it resonates with today's understanding of mission, we are not saying that something altogether new has to be invented. Today's formation has to remain firmly rooted in the traditional vision of religious-missionary formation in the Church. Therefore we can unequivocally affirm that while not ignoring or overlooking the sound and time-hallowed values of religious-missionary formation, the SVD formation programmes in our day have to pay special attention to certain additional factors.

In our Society we have two different ways of living the religious missionary vocation. There are those who choose to serve the Church as ordained ministers and others who opt for apostolic service as Brothers. The two are but two equally dignified expressions of the same vocation. Formandi should be guided to recognize this integral understanding of the community from the very beginning of their formation in order to ensure that all confreres always receive respect and recognition.

From the beginning there should be an openness to learn the theory and to acquire the practical skills of participating in and promoting dialogue. Dialogue is an attitude of the mind as well as an art. Dialogue skills can be acquired and strengthened through institutionalized learning facilities². Dialogue centres and such other out-reach ventures run by our confreres can provide for our formandi excellent experience and training in this area.

The real starting point in formation is to help the formandi to appreciate and grow in our missionary spirituality. Const. 501 puts it in terms of growth into unity with the Incarnate Word of the Father. Formation should help the formandi to grow by living the spirit of prophetic dialogue in a way that it shapes our basic relationships to God, to myself, to others and to creation. This relationship with God and other people is what helps to keep alive the enthusiasm for mission. Formation is not just a question of how to do mission but more fundamentally why I want to do mission as an SVD. It is first and foremost a matter of self-identity and motivation, and only then of the theory and skills for doing dialogue. Like every Christian I am invited to follow Christ and thus share in the divine life (cf. IDW 6 # 12). Formation aims to help me realize that my following of Christ and my sharing his divine life is in and through mission.

An important consequence of seeing mission as dialogue is that the focus now more than ever falls on the person of the missionary. The thrust of the older paradigm meant that getting baptismal water to the “pagans” was paramount. Now, in dialogue mission can no longer be just an external activity of the missionary. Mission is the sharing of one’s own faith and personal experience of God. The most fundamental formation of Jesus for his mission was his Abba

² The Common Ground Project launched by the Cardinal Bernardin Institute in Chicago is an example of an institution dedicated to training people in dialogue skills. It began with an effort to explore the areas of consensus in the ideologically polarized situation of U.S. Catholics. The centre now offers workshops for people who offer themselves to work in the area of dialogue.

experience. This realization leads to viewing the world differently, to seeing it as Jesus does and to responding with love and compassion. As missionaries we share his fullness of life through encounter with God in the people we serve. God indwelling in me enables me to meet God indwelling in the other and to grasp that we all live in God, the awareness of all people as one in the communion of God.

4.1. The Call of the Formator

It is important to realize that those involved in the ministry of formation as formators, too, are missionaries in the full sense of the word. Forming future missionaries can in no way be less meritorious than being on the frontline of mission. Because the formandi often tend to consider their formators as role models, their lifestyle and work have to be exemplary which requires a high degree of transparency on the part of formators. This is what makes the work of formators particularly demanding. But it is also a truly rewarding work because accompanying the young as they make their first faltering steps in their journey of discipleship is undoubtedly a noble task.

Formators have a crucial role in guiding the vocational journey of the formandi. It is in the first place by living the example of genuine dialogue that a formator can bring the formandi to the awareness that God indwelling in me enables me to meet God indwelling in the other. Formators have to constantly learn to practise their mission of formation as a process of dialogue. This is achieved by journeying in community with the formandi in prayerful reflection, in living by Word and sacrament, and in close contact with real missionary situations. They have to lead the reflection on how one finds God in such situations and how God enlivens our response to people. The ideal that this context proposes is to look at formation as a mutual search for knowing what God wants from each one.

Striving to practise the ideal of dialogue when dealing with the formandi, their problems, needs and decisions is indeed the most

effective way for formators to school them in dialogue. If an attitude of dialogue is conspicuously absent in the way a formator deals with the formandi and others, all his sublime talk about the changed understanding of mission as dialogue will fall on deaf ears. Today's youth are much more knowledgeable and have had the experience of living in greater freedom and openness at home (unlike the formator who may be of an older generation). A formator has to take this into consideration when dealing with them and must make a conscientious effort to be a man of dialogue in his interactions. Rather than taking an "administrative" approach, a formator should focus on creating a "formational climate" that engenders growth and creativity in the community.

4.2. New Profile of the Candidates Who Join Us

In most cultures today the family as an institution is facing formidable challenges. Broken families and single-parent households are becoming increasingly commonplace. This would imply that candidates seeking admission to our formation houses may come not only from established traditional families but also from troubled family backgrounds. Having candidates from such backgrounds would naturally place an extra burden on our formation system. We need to have competent and trained personnel who can attend to the special requirements of spiritual direction and psychological counselling that such candidates may need.

4.3. Vowed Life in Present-day Context

Various complex developments taking place in areas of social and religious thinking are posing new challenges to those who opt for a life of consecration by professing religious vows. Seeing our life as a following of Christ ("...to be with him and to be sent out" – Mk 3:14) is of pivotal significance when discussing our vowed life. It is by taking up our cross on a daily basis that we can make progress in our journey of following the footsteps of the Lord (cf. Lk 9:23). And the cross has meaning only when we view it in the light of the One who found life through the cross. During the years

of initial formation our formandi should be made aware of how our three vows influence our living together and our mission work. These are issues of utmost importance today, and they do reflect modern problems – which SVDs in final vows also face. In the area of consecrated chastity, for example, classes and interactive sessions should be organized to raise the awareness of the formandi on matters such as the sexual abuse of women and minors, the demands of a celibate lifestyle, the loss of credibility that results from irresponsible sexual behaviour, etc. The loss of Western benefactors has drastically reduced our material resources. This has consequences for our life and for our missionary methods. We should be on the guard against consumerist attitudes. Obedience can imply being sent by the Church and the Society to go to places and do activity that perhaps we neither like nor want.

One frequently hears the lament that we are losing the spirit of sacrifice – once understood as the foundation on which religious life was built. We know that if we consistently try to avoid making sacrifices we can never be happy in our life as religious. This conviction has to be nurtured from the beginning of our formation. Linked to this is the need to inculcate certain important values in our life from the beginning of the formation process: flexibility instead of stubbornness and rigidity, team-work instead of going it alone, the willingness to participate in a community discernment process, and the willingness to share (one's thoughts, one's feelings, one's problems, one's finances, etc.).

Formation programmes should also address the problem of failure. It is something we all face sooner or later, and we should be prepared for it. "Formation for mission cannot be a preparation for a life of endless successes. Neither can it be blind to the attractions of a consumerist mentality that foster a comfort culture. Lack of success and frustration are normal parts of our missionary work of prophetic dialogue and so we must be prepared for a life that includes sacrifice and the cross" (IDW 6, # 96). We have a tendency to idealize our missionary future, forgetting that there will be disagreements, hostility, failures and a good possibility that we may not even like our colleagues and/or our confreres. A wholesome

formation would ensure that we do not give up at such moments of struggle and hardship.

4.4. Intercultural Living

Internationality is a value that our congregation has cherished from its earliest days. But until very recently it meant mostly having an international membership or being international by geography while remaining Euro-centric in culture and formation. With Vatican II there developed a radical change in the notion of internationality. The positive evaluation of culture led to the conviction that what is specifically SVD can be legitimately expressed in the categories of all cultures. "Like the Gospel, the original charism of the Society not only could enrich but also could be enriched by the cultures in which it incarnates itself" (A.M. Pernia, *Sedos Bulletin* 41 [2009] p. 19). As a result we now hold up interculturality as a genuine value. It links up very well with another pivotal concept that has emerged from reflection on the teachings of Vatican II – cross-cultural mission. "Indeed, if mission were confined to one's own culture or world, something essential would be lost in mission. If missionaries were to work only in their own culture or country, one could suspect that they are motivated by the human ties that bind them with their people. But to work in another culture or country? No human ties would explain that, but only the experience of the beauty of the Gospel which proclaims that God is love" (Pernia, *Sedos Bulletin*, p. 24).

Missionaries living in international or intercultural communities become, through the example of their life (dialogue of life), more credible witnesses of the universality of God's Reign and its openness to diversity. Indeed, "...the witness of our life together in multicultural religious missionary communities is itself a means of engaging in prophetic dialogue" (Kisala, *Verbum SVD* 47 [2006] p. 338). Such all-embracing inclusiveness is particularly relevant today in the context of the growing effects of globalization, which tends to exclude the different "other," to ensure uniformity and even to eliminate differences.

But an intercultural community does not happen by chance. “Rather, true international or inter-cultural communities need to be consciously created, intentionally promoted, carefully cared for and attentively nurtured. They require some basic personal attitudes, certain community structures, and a particular spirituality. Consequently, members need a specific programme of formation, both initial and ongoing, which prepares them to live effectively and meaningfully in international or inter-cultural communities” (Pernia, *Sedos Bulletin*, p. 25). Intercultural living and other aspects of mission today require the re-imagining of our formation programmes. In countries and provinces where we still have a good number of vocations – which in turn entails that a considerable number of young missionaries will be seeking overseas mission assignments in time – this aspect has to be specially emphasised in formation.

In a recent article that he wrote, General Councillor Robert Kisala has identified three areas of inter-cultural living that need to be addressed through appropriate programmes during initial formation (see *Verbum SVD* 50 [2009] pp. 331-345). These areas are: intercultural competence, knowledge of different cultures, and acquiring behavioural skills. He has briefly explained the working out of these areas, and so the article provides helpful insights for efforts to design formation programmes (both initial and ongoing) intended to facilitate intercultural living. What Kisala says in the conclusion of his essay remarkably sums up the matter: “Our formation for intercultural living and mission must be based on the principle of mutuality emphasized by the word ‘intercultural’ and needs to be specific, not left to chance. Where they do not already exist, programs for understanding interculturalisation and enhancing intercultural competency should be introduced, both in initial formation and ongoing formation” (p. 343).

4.5. Mission Partnership with the Laity

In Dialogue with the Word 8 has been successful in alerting us about the crucial need to examine our partnership with the laity. Changes

in demographic, cultural and religious spheres pose formidable challenges for the Church and its present structures. But these challenges contain seeds of opportunities as well. For instance, the drop in religious and priestly vocations is prompting more and more laypersons to assume responsibility for ministries and apostolates in the Church. The shrinking of Catholic parishes in the affluent geo-political North is contributing to the spread of laity-led movements everywhere in the Church. The perceptible revival of interest in religiosity, while not drawing people closer to institutionalized religions, is nonetheless instilling in the laity a quest for spiritual experience and concrete expressions of active concern for one's neighbour (cf. IDW 8, pp. 8-9, 15-24).

It is against this background that we need to read and reflect on recommendation 3.3.2 of the 2006 General Chapter: "That the Society promote where possible the participation of laity in relevant sessions within our provincial assemblies and chapters in line with our Statutes for Chapters, our initial and ongoing formation, our SVD administration, and our missionary work *ad gentes*". God's mission is an enormous enterprise. We need to see ourselves as partners in this enterprise with all people of good will. We have to move beyond familiar shores to ensure fruitful collaboration, join hands with the lay participants of the same mission, and jointly put our shoulders to the wheel to advance it. This awareness should be created in the formandi through involvement in concrete projects of lay participation in our life and work. We have to admit that the Church is sustained in the first place by the laity and we must learn to leave that place of prominence to them. A concrete expression of it would be when we involve the laity and specifically religious sisters in processes such as the evaluation and admission of our formandi to vows and holy orders.

An essential attitude that we (especially those of us who have chosen the clerical state of vocation) must develop is learning to respect and to appreciate the laity, especially our Brothers! The various expressions of clericalism are capable of inflicting grave wounds on people's psyche and our formandi should be made aware of it.

4.6. Academic Formation

The ultimate aim of our formation is, our constitutions remind us, “to bring about human maturity, professional competence and committed faith” (c. 503). The journey to this goal is demanding and lifelong, yet rewarding. One of the major paths that we take to arrive there is academic formation. Committed study, reflective silence and self-transforming prayer are components of such a formation. The General Chapter of 1988 highlighted the underlying idea when it proposed the following guiding principle of our formation: “Formation enables a confrere to develop a model of learning that integrates creative academic study with a critical ability to reflect on and learn from experience” (FTW 1, p. 65).

Our academic pursuit has to have a distinctive missionary perspective about it. That is why the Society has been insisting that students “should take courses in anthropology, missiology, studies of religion and culture, and related sciences; language learning, theory and skills for dialogue, justice and peace issues and communications” (FTW 1, p. 70). Wherever possible we must influence the authorities of institutes where our formandi do their studies to include these topics in their curriculum. In situations where we cannot exert such influence, we should ensure that these topics are treated adequately through our own arrangements. Every formation centre should undertake a systematic evaluation to find out how sound is its academic formation and how strong its missionary orientation.

4.7. Cultivating a Sense of Observation

A keen sense of observation to read correctly the signs of the time is essential to be proactive in the missionary enterprise today. This is a skill that one can acquire through consistent effort and by continually seeking the guidance of the Spirit of God in an attitude of openness. The ability to size up the reality around us is an essential first step to be able to respond effectively to it. During the time of initial formation the formandi should be guided to acquire

this skill. In the absence of it missionaries can easily fall into the trap of non-reflective ministry and purposeless activism. Also relevant in this context is the need to develop a healthy attitude of self-criticism. This is what helps us always to own up responsibility for our actions as an adult. This must obviously go hand in hand with a proper self-acceptance and self-respect.

The well-known framework of “see-judge-act” can be an effective model for all formation-related efforts. Growing up in this mode can be very helpful for future engagement in the mission. The practice of a personal setting of time-bound goals and the periodic evaluation of their compliance is greatly beneficial for achieving progress in our formational journey. The formandi trained in this manner will readily see the advantage of setting personal goals and evaluating them periodically also in all their efforts of missionary outreach when the time for it comes.

4.8. Preferential Option for the Poor and Commitment to the Care of Creation

Justice and peace issues increasingly cry for our attention in the world of today. The planet itself is pushed to the brink due to human mismanagement of the environment. The violation of human rights is rampant, systemic evils such as human trafficking and ethnic cleansing go unchallenged, and the ranks of the poor increase each day. We as missionaries are the bearers of hope in a world whose face is profoundly scarred by these evils. To be able to make even a small difference in this dismal scenario we need to develop a deep social consciousness and a keen sense of commitment to the integrity of creation. Our formation process and our lifestyle must be geared to it.

4.9. Direct Exposure to Real Missionary Situations

Ideally formation should take place in close proximity to real missionary situations and in constant interaction with missionary

personnel active in the field. Through a guided process the formandi should be encouraged to make a realistic assessment of the missionary response taking place in their vicinity so that they can analyse its lights and shadows. Realities that one encounters in the mission should become impulses for learning new lessons. Such learning becomes possible through opportunities for a hands-on experience of actual missionary activity. They should become a regular ingredient of our formation programmes. Direct experience of mission helps the formandi to gather a realistic idea of what to expect as they enter the field at the end of their initial formation. We have certain established processes to provide such hands-on experience of mission: Regency, Cross-cultural Training Programme (CTP), Overseas Training Programme (OTP), Exposure and Immersion Programme (EIP), Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) and supervised pastoral ministry. To ensure that these programmes become more effective in contributing to our missionary formation, we should make use of the action-reflection-action model.

4.10. Critical Solidarity with Structures

We need to develop a keen awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of the structures that provide us with support during the years of initial formation. While big communities with elaborate infrastructure facilities provide us with stability, security and an atmosphere conducive to academic work, they can cut us off from the reality of the world outside. This in turn can engender within us a certain insensitivity to our surrounding reality. The awareness of the limitations imposed by external factors is an important dimension of formation. It may often be the case that old structures are not adequate to take on the new challenges that we face in the area of formation. It is true that small formation communities may not always and everywhere be a viable option, but our preference should be for programmes that allow for interpersonal interaction and rootedness in the life of the people. Our choice of vocation as religious missionaries should instil in us the need to develop a keen awareness of the socio-economic reality that exists in our immediate

surroundings, a sense for the responsible use of the facilities offered to us, and an ability to develop an abiding appreciation and gratitude for the help of the many benefactors who contribute to our well-being by their sacrifices.

4.11. Venturing into New Experiments

A judicious preparedness to make new experiments should be part of our formation ethos. No one can deny the truth of the adage: “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.” If we do not open ourselves to new experiences, we cannot learn anything new. But undoubtedly it is something that should be undertaken with a fair measure of wisdom and courage. This can only be the product of communal research, discussion, and decision-making. What is called for is clearly a Spirit-led process of community discernment and regular evaluation. Formandi should learn to make and follow through on decisions made in common with other members of the province.

4.12. Ongoing Formation

Today at all levels of the Society we are becoming increasingly aware of the crucial need for ongoing formation. In essence it points to a never-flagging effort to maintain in perpetual sharpness the cutting edge of our professional competence, missionary commitment and pastoral effectiveness. This does not happen simply by growing in age and physical maturity but requires purposeful action to transform ourselves into well-rounded persons, to hone our skills, to round off our rough edges and to grow in faith. The formandi have to imbibe this conviction from the early days of their initial formation so that they develop a sense of responsibility for their continuing formation and assume it as a lifetime commitment.

5. Conclusion

The *Handbook for Superiors*, in dealing with the question of initial formation, makes the following significant observation: “The formation program should be geared to integrating the professional and experiential training of the students with the religious and spiritual training begun in the novitiate. This program of formation should be revised and updated periodically in keeping with the needs of the Church, the nature and the end of the Society, and the signs of the times” (C 18 1.3). The present document hopes to encourage the renewal of the formation process in our Society in the light of the signs of the times that have appeared on our horizons in recent years. It is true that local conditions greatly influence the concrete shaping of some of the details of the formation programme and that every local church has its own specific challenges. Our Society, spread over nearly 70 countries, surely has an enormously complex array of local conditions. Therefore the concrete details of formation will differ considerably. But as one religious institute we need to have a common ethos of formation. What this document seeks to set out is precisely some of the salient elements of that ethos. For the same reason it comes with a call addressed to all the provinces and regions to undertake an evaluation of their existing formation programme to see if it truly resonates with the vision presented here. That in turn must entail genuine efforts to introduce changes that are deemed necessary. These changes must obviously be appropriate to each level of formation and respectful of the cultural context in which a formation community is situated.

The Apostle Paul, while addressing his fellow Christians in the church of Galatia, uses a striking metaphor to refer to the process they are engaged in as they try to grow into the maturity of the

faith they received. “My little children,” he croons with understandable affection, “for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (Gal 4:19). Faith is never stationary: either it grows or it withers; sometimes it dies. Growing in faith is, Paul surmises, the same as allowing Christ to grow in us. The metaphor can readily be applied to the progress we make in our common and individual vocational journey as religious missionaries. Like all aspects of faith, formation too is a voyage of the heart – and it is for the long haul. It is truly a journey that involves a lifetime of struggle. The enterprise of forming Christ within us is something that we succeed in through patience and perseverance. It is by falling, crawling and carrying the cross that we must move on – not through an intense overnight effort but over a long period of time, not with the violent force of a cloudburst but with the gentle constancy of a persistent shower. This is a task which is both inviting and forbidding, offered to us as a gift, yet confronting us as a challenge. Only the brave, however, will prove themselves equal to it!

References:

- Gaudium et Spes* (GS), Vatican II Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (1965).
- Redemptoris Missio* (RM), Papal Encyclical on the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate (1987).
- Constitutions of the Society of the Divine Word* (1983, 2000, 2006).
- Handbook for Superiors SVD* (2002).
- Following the Word* (FTW), No. 1, August 1988.
- In Dialogue with the Word* (IDW), No. 1, September 2000.
- In Dialogue with the Word* (IDW), No. 3, September 2002.
- In Dialogue with the Word* (IDW), No.6, September 2006.
- In Dialogue with the Word* (IDW), No. 8, December 2008.
- Antonio M. Pernia, "Foreword," in *In Dialogue with the Word* (IDW), No. 3, (2002), pp. 5-9.
- , "Comedy and Missionary Communion – 'Mission as Holy Folly'," in *SEDOS Bulletin* 41 (2009), pp. 17-26.
- Robert Kisala, "Prophetic Dialogue as Life and Mission," in *Verbum SVD* 47 (2007), pp. 327-342.
- , "Formation for Intercultural Life and Mission," in *Verbum SVD* 50 (2009), pp. 331-345.
- Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962).

