



Washing of the Feet: A Proposed Missiological Paradigm in Doing Mission with the Exiled Myanmar Migrants in Ranong, Thailand

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an understanding of the experiences of the Myanmar migrants in diaspora. The military takeover of Myanmar in the 1960s set off massive migration that continues to this day. Dirty politics and corruption have led to forced migration to neighboring countries, most notably to Thailand where there is today the biggest population of documented migrants. The border town of Ranong in the southern part of Thailand, in particular, has been steadily receiving Myanmar migrants for decades now because of its less strict regulations on employment opportunities in the fishing, agricultural, and manufacturing industries. Work conditions, however, exposed the migrant laborers, including the minors among them, to the serious risks of physical abuse, labor exploitation, and drugs. Using the “See-Judge-Act” approach, the paper attempts to answer the following questions: How does the Marist mission respond to the needs of the Myanmar migrants in Ranong? How does this mission relate the notion of the exilic Myanmar in the light of the Jewish diaspora? What missiological model can help the Marists and the local church of Ranong effectively bring about their mission to the Myanmar migrants?



INTRODUCTION

The military takeover of Myanmar in the 1960s set off massive migration that continues to this day.¹ Favored army officials emerged as the new ruling class, sending out their forces to crush any kind of rebellion.² The iron-fisted clampdown silenced the press, expelled foreigners, and shut down borders. All industries were put under state control, with multinational corporations supportive of the military regime being granted the right to exploit Myanmar's natural resources.³ Under the military regime, the country soon slid into dire social conditions of rampant malnutrition, underemployment, and lack of access to education and health facilities for the local populace.

Dirty politics and corruption have led to forced migration to neighboring countries, most notably to Thailand where there is today the biggest population of documented Myanmar migrants. The border town of Ranong in the southern part of Thailand, in particular, has been steadily receiving Myanmar migrants for decades now because of its less strict regulations on employment opportunities in the fishing, agricultural, and manufacturing industries. Work conditions, however, reportedly exposed the migrant laborers, including the minors among them, to the serious risks of physical abuse, labor exploitation, and drugs.⁴

In response to the plight of the Myanmar migrants in Ranong, the Marist Fathers of Asia District established the Marist Asia Foundation (MAF) to support their Education, Health and Migrant Worker needs and promote the formation of future leaders who would serve their migrant community and their country.⁵ As a scholastic sent to Ranong for two years under the Marist Mission Experience (MME) Program, I was part of the MAF's Education Program, and I interacted as well with the HIV/AIDS patients who came to the Marist

¹Formerly known as Burma.

²Jackie Bennion, "Burma: A Political Timeline," *Frontline World*, <http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/burma601/timeline.html#>.

³Sunil Kumar Pokhrel, "Country Studies Series: Myanmar," (Massachusetts: Brandeis University, 2008), http://www.brandeis.edu/globalbrandeis/documents/Myanmar_FINAL.pdf.

⁴Marist Mission Ranong, "MMR Annual Report 2009," (Thailand: Marist Mission Ranong, 2009), 9.

⁵Marist Mission Ranong, "MMR Annual Report 2013," (Thailand: Marist Mission Ranong, 2013), 2.

Center. Through them, I witnessed the miserable life conditions of the Myanmar migrants in Ranong. Increasingly, I came to see a similarity between their experience and that of the Jews in Babylon. It led me to ask how we can more adequately respond to the needs of these displaced people. And given that the Marist mission has been at this task for over ten years now, there is a need for a periodic assessment of its role in the lives of the Myanmar exiles towards formulating an appropriate missiological paradigm for doing mission with them.

I aim to answer the following questions: How does the Marist mission respond to the needs of the Myanmar migrants in Ranong? How does the MAF relate the notion of the exilic Myanmar in the light of the Jewish diaspora? What missiological model can help the Marists and the local church of Ranong effectively bring about their mission to the Myanmar migrants?

This study attempts to build an understanding of the experiences of the Myanmar migrants in diaspora. My two-year exposure in Ranong gave me daily experiences with the migrants that enabled me to understand their context. I use this knowledge as the jumping board for questioning and discussion.

I use the “See-Judge-Act” approach, a tool legitimized by Pope John XXII in his 15 May 1961 encyclical *Mater et Magistra*.⁶ I start my discussion with the exposition of the reality of the exilic experience of the Myanmar migrants in Ranong, Thailand. This includes the historical and present contexts of their migration (Seeing Part). Then, I tackle their different situations as migrants in Ranong. This part will show the various scenarios that went wrong: Why they have become vulnerable and susceptible to many forms of discrimination. In this portion, I also make a presentation of the diasporic experiences of the Jewish people in Babylon. Using this Israelite experience as framework, I show how these Myanmar migrants might make sense of their anguish (Judging Part). I proceed then to propose a certain missiological paradigm to help the Marists approach these vulnerable people (Response Part).

⁶Conceptualized by the late Cardinal Joseph Cardijn, founder of the Young Christian Workers (YCW) movement.

In order to do these, I draw out some information from my own experiences in Ranong and interview migrant workers, Thai and Burmese friends who have direct experience of them, and the Marist Mission Ranong (MMR) leaders and volunteers. I review the MMR annual reports, biblical resources on the Babylonian exile, and materials on Myanmar history.

OVERVIEW OF MYANMAR MIGRANTS DIASPORA IN RANONG

Ranong Province is the least-populated province in Thailand. Located on the narrow Isthmus of Kra, it is heavily forested and mountainous, and receives the highest average annual rainfall. The provincial capital is located in the town of Ranong, 568 km from Bangkok. Ranong is a popular border-crossing point from Kawthaung, the southernmost point of neighboring Myanmar. The two border towns are separated only by Pak Chan, the estuary of Mae Nam Chan. Thus, separated by a 30-minute boat ride, Kawthaung and Ranong residents have been habitually doing brisk trade with each other for some time.⁷

Ranong has been a popular destination for Myanmar residents wishing to escape abject poverty and miserable life conditions in their country. Part of Ranong's attraction to these migrants is the employment opportunities offered by the fishing and seafood processing facilities, if one can get around the stringent migration policy that bars unskilled migrant workers to work in Thailand.⁸

Myanmar migrants can enter Thailand by securing a 7-day border pass with which they can go through the Thai immigration. Once in, they can use the allowed time to apply for a work permit and find employment.⁹ However, there too is a daily flow of illegal migrants—mostly from Dawei and Mawlamyine—who cross the

⁷Koichi Fujita, et al., "Myanmar Migrant Laborers in Ranong, Thailand," Institute of Developing Economies Discussion Paper No. 257 (2010), 3, <http://www.ide.go.jp/English/Publish/Download/Dp/pdf/257.pdf>.

⁸This rule has been recently relaxed somewhat with a Cabinet resolution that allowed the registration of unskilled migrant laborers from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos for work permits.

⁹The validity and conditions for the work permit vary, such that the legal status of the migrant worker remains insecure.

border and take whatever work they can.¹⁰ Since many Thais do not find employment in the seafood industry attractive, many Thai employers hire migrant workers instead, a condition that opened up the deluge of migrant workers to Ranong.¹¹

It is estimated that there are 80,000 to 100,000 Myanmar migrant workers in Ranong, most of them laboring under onerous work conditions that include unsafe work environments, low pay, long hours, and other health hazards. Typically, new migrants are likely to find that the only available work open to them is for unskilled labor in fishing and in the seafood processing plants. Still, over the years, Myanmar migrants in Ranong have extended their labor participation in 3D jobs (dirty, difficult, and demanding) in various economic sectors, to include agriculture, forestry, construction, commerce, domestic services, and the flesh trade.¹²

Despite the long history of cross-border trade between the two nations, many Thais still hold the Myanmar people in disdain and with suspicion. While the Ranong economy is to a large part dependent on the ready availability of cheap unskilled Myanmar labor, they are considered by some quarters as a threat to Thai national security, as well as to its economic and social development. This xenophobia sometimes finds discriminatory or violent expressions directed at Myanmar migrants, and most especially at those who have HIV/AIDS infection.

Children of migrants are rendered most vulnerable with most parents working long hours or required to be away from home for work, needing them to be left in the care of older siblings. With little or no language proficiency for the medium of instruction in Thai schools, they do not adjust well to the formal school system even though the law allows their attendance. Those in school often become targets of

¹⁰Fujita, et al. "Myanmar Migrant Laborers," 33.

¹¹A 2009 MMR study showed that only a third of such employed migrants had work permits. The rush of migrants to Ranong raised alarm among Thai authorities on concerns of national security, public health, and social security.

¹²Alienor Salmon, Saw Aung Thanwai, and Hattaya Wongsangpaiboon, "In School, In Society: Early Childhood Development in Myanmar Migrant Communities in Thailand," VSO Thailand/ Myanmar (April 2013), <http://www.vsointernational.org/Images/in-school-in-society-early-childhood-development-in-myanmar-migrant-communities-in-thailand.tcm76-39034.pdf>.

bullying by local children. Because of this, thirteen Myanmar Learning Centers were established in Ranong. However, these are characterized by substandard facilities—hot and noisy, and invariably overcrowded. It is difficult for even the most determined students to learn here.¹³ Thus, many children end up working instead in local fish processing factories and timber industries.

THE MARIST MISSION'S RESPONSE TO THE NEEDS OF THE MYANMAR MIGRANTS IN RANONG

The MAF traces its origins to the Mission District of the Society of Mary (Marist Fathers) in the Philippines. In 2004 when it became evident to the Marist Fathers that Myanmar was in special need of assistance, they sent three Marists to Myanmar to study the language and work among the Kachin in Banmaw in the northeast diocese of Myitkyina. There they found that working with the local residents posed much difficulty as the local authorities treated them with suspicion. After 18 months, they were denied renewal of their visa. Thus, they were constrained to move to Ranong on the Thailand border.

Established first as MMR, it was eventually registered with the Thai authorities as MAF in 2006. It exists primarily to serve Myanmar migrants in Ranong, but offers assistance to anyone in need, regardless of creed, age, or ethnicity. Slowly, Myanmar migrants began to connect to the MAF, but it was only the completion of the Marist Center in Ranong that conveyed to all the approval of the Thai authorities of the MAF's work for HIV and AIDS Care Support, Education Programs, and Migrant Support Programs.

MAF's HIV and AIDS Care Support is implemented through the MMR Health Program that addresses the basic physical and emotional needs of HIV-infected migrants, as well as educates their family members and caregivers on living with their condition. Its services include the distribution of basic food items, personal care and counseling, and individualized medication explanation. The program

¹³Marist Mission Ranong, "MMR Annual Report 2009," 8-9.

also encourages a support system among the patients through a monthly self-help groups' assembly. MMR supports the public health system through translation appointments at the Ranong Public Hospital for Tuberculosis (TB) and HIV/AIDS patients to ensure that the medical advice is understood and effective assistance is provided. As of 2013, the MMR HIV/AIDS Health Project has catered to 80 patients, providing a total of 1,260 home visits and monthly personal contact.

The Education Program, on the other hand, manages a preschool facility, a nonformal secondary education program that prepares teenagers to be mainstreamed into the Thai school system, and a university online diploma program. The preschool program was established as an alternative for working parents with no access to child care support. It is aimed to promote early on a positive attitude towards school attendance. The university online diploma program, on the other hand, was undertaken in partnership with the Australian Catholic University Thai/Burma Border Program. It makes available an internationally recognized qualification in the English language medium that helps students find meaningful employment or gain entrance in universities. To date, seventeen students have completed the course and found employment as teachers, health workers, or as staff in nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and in hotels.

The Migrant Support Program is aimed at easing the integration of Myanmar migrants into the Thai society while grounded in the integrity of their cultural identity. The comfortable Community Center/Library established under this program houses over 3,000 Burmese books accessed by around 500 members. Classes for adults are held for computer applications and language instruction (English and Thai). This program also manages the Future Leaders Group that provides mentoring in education, leadership, life skills, and work values formation among young migrants to prepare them for employment with NGOs in Ranong.

THE NOTION OF THE EXILIC MYANMAR IN THE LIGHT OF THE JEWISH DIASPORA

To avoid confusion, I am using the concept of diaspora, exile, and migration interchangeably. These terms would mean the motivated dispersal of people away from their homeland as a result of conflict, dire economic conditions, and/or socioreligious strife. People are driven out of their homes into exile because of desperation or persecution, and aspirations for better lives somewhere else.¹⁴

There are uncountable and unaccountable masses of immigrants who flee en masse due to political or ethnic persecution or, in the case of Myanmar migrants in Ranong, economic motivations. As Fr. Victorino Cueto, CSsR asserts, they often find themselves in a relatively hostile environment where they lack social recognition needed for decent survival and existence. They have to negotiate their way into a social space where they have to weather discrimination before their presence gains a measure of tolerance and acceptance.¹⁵

For the Myanmar migrants in Ranong, adjustment to a new environment involves a protracted hybrid existence that requires them to take on an unstable identity where conflicting traditions—linguistic, social, religious, and ideological—are negotiated for daily living. Such takes its toll on their personal lives, intimacy, and self-identity.¹⁶ Often, they arrive in a strange new place with little or no expectation of what they would find and where they will have to rebuild their identity in their daily social engagements. Theirs is an “in-between world” akin to living in the “borders.”¹⁷ The bordering is manifested in the marginalization of and escalating discrimination against the migrants despite their contribution as cheap labor in the thriving economy of Ranong. The experience finds much resonance with the Jewish exile from Egypt and in Babylon and Syria at the end of the Old Testament Era.¹⁸

¹⁴Renaud Egreteau, “Burma in Diaspora: A Preliminary Note on the Politics of Burmese Diasporic Communities in Asia,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 31, no. 2 (2012), 115.

¹⁵Fr. Victorino Cueto, CSsR, “Out of Place: Exilic Existence in a HyperGlobalized World,” *Faith on the Move: Toward a Theology of Migration in Asia*, ed. Fabio Baggio and Agnes M. Brazal (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, 2008), 2.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 5

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Ted Rubesh, *Diaspora Distinctives: The Jewish Diaspora Experience in the Old Testament* (Sri Lanka: Lanka Bible College, 2010), 114, http://www.ttgst.ac.kr/upload/ttgst_resources13/20124-259.pdf.

As the prophecies of Ezekiel foretold, the Jews believed that the Lord Himself initiated their painful exilic experiences to Babylon for having broken faith with God through sin, infidelity, idolatry, and injustice.¹⁹ Jews were compelled to desert the land promised to Moses and his progeny, condemned thereafter to forever wander. Babylon subsequently became a code word among the Jews for the afflictions, isolation, and insecurity of living in a foreign land—set adrift, excised from their roots and their sense of identity, oppressed by an alien ruling class.²⁰ The wandering Jew and the trauma of his dispossession became a favorite motif told and retold in Jewish oral tradition, showing up in Jewish literature, art, culture, and prayer.²¹ At an individual level, diasporic Jews were depicted as pathological half-persons—destined never to realize themselves or to attain their completeness, tranquility, or happiness so long as they were in exile.²² Despite the bitterness of their life in the foreign land, they were, after a time, assimilated into their host culture to eventually lose their identity as a unique people.

On the other hand, the Jews who came from Judah had a different experience of exile in Babylon. They were able to preserve their Jewish life and identity and keep these flourishing till it spread across the Babylonian Empire.²³ Martin Noth (as quoted in Smith, 2002) suggested that the exiles were not “prisoners” but represented a compulsory transplanted subject population who were able to move about freely in their daily life, though compelled to render compulsory labor.²⁴ Heeding the advice of the prophet Jeremiah, they sought sociopolitical engagement with the host culture—they built homes, planted gardens, married, and raised families.²⁵ They settled in, started

¹⁹Ezekiel 12:8-12 and 17:11-12); Thomas Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets: Their Stories, Sayings and Scrolls* (New York: Paulist Press 2007), 291-293; Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, 2d edition (London and New York: Routledge 2008), 22-23, <http://prodiasporaromana.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Cohen-2008-Global-Diasporas-An-Introduction-2n-Bookos.org.pdf>. Crossway Bibles, “Introduction to Exekiel,” (Illinois: Good News Publishers, 2007), <http://svstudybible.org/wp-content/uploads/excerpt-ezekiel-intro.pdf>.

²⁰Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 22-23.

²¹Ibid., 23.

²²Ibid., 23

²³Rubesh, *Diaspora Distinctives*, 127.

²⁴Daniel Smith, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 65.

²⁵Jeremiah 29:4-7.

businesses, or found work in the Babylonian market.²⁶ Consequently, even as a diasporic community, they became a blessing to the nations, they contributed positively to the life and peace of the city. The Jewish diasporic community came to be recognized as Jewish Babylonians, became successful, and attained some sort of equilibrium and comfort in their lives.

It can be said, however, that they were able to do this because Babylon tolerated exiles. There was no evidence that the Jewish Babylonians were made to suffer suppression or religious persecution. In Ezekiel 33:30-33, it is written that the community members had “a certain internal autonomy and that they enjoyed the freedom to manage their community life.”²⁷

Considering the historical and religious experiences of the Israelites, we can view their relationship with foreigners in three different ways: The foreigner as an object of compassion; the foreigner as a subject in a relationship; and the foreigner in a reciprocal relationship. Migrants, as with the rest of humanity, are subject and object in their relationship with one another. This two-way relationship is best seen in a reciprocity that becomes hospitality. It takes recognition from one’s self to truly embrace and accept the reality that we have a stranger identity within us. When we appreciate the foreigner within, hating the foreigner outside us is not a possibility anymore.

THE MISSIOLOGICAL MODEL OF THE MARISTS AND THE LOCAL CHURCH OF RANONG

Love of and service to millions of migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) is actually not new to the mission of the Church. This is so because the work is rooted in the Scriptures.²⁸ The Old Testament gives emphasis to the lives of the Jewish people in diaspora. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ Himself bears witness to life in exile. In the Church, therefore, no one is a stranger because she embraces “every nation, race, people, and tongue.” (Rv 7:9).

²⁶Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets*, 279.

²⁷Smith, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, 65-66.

²⁸Jigger Latoza, “A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service to Migrant Workers and Refugees in the 3rd Millennium,” 7th Plenary Council: Workshop Discussion Guide (Thailand: FABC, 2000), 6.

In 1969, Pope Paul VI issued his *motu proprio*, *Pastoralis Migratorum Cura*, to state that the pastoral care for migrants has always drawn the attention and maternal care of the Church throughout the centuries, likening migrants with the vulnerable Christ exiled in Egypt with the family of Nazareth.²⁹ The figure of Christ as a migrant can be contemplated from his life: Born away from home and coming from another land (cf. Lk 2:4-7), “He came to dwell among us” (cf. Jn 1:11, 14), and spent His public life on the move (cf. Lk 13:22; Mt 9:35). After His resurrection, still a foreigner and unknown, He appeared on the way to Emmaus to two of his disciples who only recognized Him at the breaking of the bread (cf. Lk 24:35). Christians are followers of a man on the move “who has nowhere to lay his head” (Mt 8:20; Lk 9:58).

Earlier, the Vatican II documents presented directives on doing pastoral work with migrants, calling Christians to an awareness of the influence that exilic influence has on life. The Second Vatican Council marked a decisive moment for the pastoral care of migrants and itinerant persons, paying particular importance to the meaning of mobility and catholicity and that of particular Churches, to the sense of parish, and to the vision of the Church as mystery of communion. The Council called upon the laity in particular to extend their collaboration to all sectors of society and thus be a “neighbor” to the migrant.³⁰

Consequently, welcoming the stranger or the foreigner, a characteristic of the early church, still remains a permanent feature of the Church of God. To do this, the people of God must fully embrace a hospitable attitude, such as marks the vocation to be in exile, dispersed among cultures and ethnic groups without ever identifying itself completely with any of them. It would be the first sign of the prophesied universal Kingdom and community that welcomes and embraces every human being without preference for persons or people. Thus, welcoming the stranger or foreigner is still fundamental to the nature of the Church, and bears witness to its fidelity to the gospel.³¹

²⁹Pope Paul VI, *Motu Proprio: Pastoralis Migratorum Cura* (Roma, 1969). http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19690815_pastoralis-migratorum-cura_it.html.

³⁰Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, Instruction: *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi* (The Love of Christ Towards Migrants) (Vatican City, 2004), no. 22.

³¹*Ibid.*

One of the indispensable questions that is always raised in the pastoral care for migrants who belong to other faith traditions is how to overcome the differences in the dynamism of pastoral work. The Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People responds by saying that the Church, as a sacrament of unity, should overcome ideological or racial barriers and proclaim to all people and all cultures the need to strive for the truth in the perspective of genuine engagements with the differences through dialogue and mutual acceptance. The different cultural identities should open up possibilities to a universal way of understanding, not abandoning the positive elements of cultures, but putting them at the service of the whole of humanity. This understanding highlights and reveals that unity in diversity that is contemplated in the Trinity, allows the communion which, for its part, allows further the communion of all to reach the fullness of the personal life of each one.³²

On the other hand, the complexities in cultures, ideologies, and faith traditions make inculturation even more necessary because it is not possible to do mission without entering into a serious dialogue with cultures. Hence, together with peoples of different roots, other values and models of life are knocking at our doors.³³ The task of the Church is to renew its model of inculturation in the context of responding to the welfare of migrants that belong to other faith traditions. It begins by listening to get to know those to whom we proclaim the gospel. Thus begins the discernment of the values and countervalues of their cultures in the light of the Paschal Mystery of death and life. Tolerance is not enough; what is needed is a certain feeling for the other, a respect for the cultural identity of one's dialogue partners and attention to their dignity and freedom. The love of God, while it gives humankind the truth and shows everyone his highest vocation, also promotes the dignity of each migrant and gives birth to community.³⁴

³²Ibid., no. 34.

³³Ibid., no. 36.

³⁴Ibid.

During the World Migration Day in 1999, Pope John Paul II declared the Church in solidarity with the world of migrants who, with their variety of languages, races, cultures and customs, remind her of her own condition as a people on pilgrimage from every part of the earth to their final homeland. This vision helps Christians reject all nationalistic thinking and to avoid narrow ideological categories.³⁵

In the same way, in his Easter Message and Apostolic Blessing *Urbi et Orbi*, Pope Francis connected this attribution to the Resurrection and our own attitude, admonishing the faithful to enable the power of His love to transform our lives; for us to become agents of His mercy, channels through which God can water the earth, protect all creation and make justice and peace flourish.³⁶

Working among Buddhist migrants in Ranong, however, poses some difficulty for Catholic missionaries in conveying their religious identity and manifesting their faith to Jesus through humanitarian work. It is the first time for most of these Myanmar migrants to meet people of the Catholic faith. They ask why we are helping them and why we celebrate the Holy Eucharist in their midst every day. Such enduring questions and the difficulty to convey a reply call us to reinterpret the meaning of the Eucharist in a way that the Buddhist migrants and the local society would grasp our identity as religious and as missionaries. Upon reflection, Fr. John Larsen, SM found inspiration in John's gospel, which uses the tradition of washing of the feet as another form of a Eucharistic tradition.³⁷ As a form of Eucharist, this gesture will help the Buddhist communities in Ranong embrace the language that missionaries use to describe our faith in Jesus.

³⁵Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People and Pontifical Council *Cor Unum*, "Welcoming Christ in Refugees and Forcibly Displaced Persons," Pastoral Guidelines, 3 (Vatican City, 2013) http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/corunum/corunum_en/pubblicazioni_en/Rifugiati-2013-INGL.pdf.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 3-4.

³⁷Fr. John Larsen, SM, is a Marist priest from New Zealand. He served as a missionary in the Philippines for a long time before he was sent to lead the group that started the Myanmar mission.

The washing of the feet of the monks is also a Buddhist ritual performed by the faithful. We observe that when the monks bearing their begging bowls come in a procession to a certain house, they are met by a servant who bows low and proceeds to wash their feet. Upon entering the house, the master of the house in turn washes the monks' feet.³⁸

The image of the washing of the feet as Christian service might be tricky in the context of Thailand and Myanmar, as it could be construed to convey an unequal relationship between the washer and the washed. Larsen cautions that the washing of the feet is a symbol of service offered among friends who are equals, freely given for the good of the other. The gesture should be interpreted in the light of the washing of the feet narrative of John's gospel. It is a gesture freely given to these vulnerable people; the missionary, i.e., the one who does the washing, is manifesting a gesture of dying for the other and certainly not expecting any reward. This is because it is the core of Jesus' message in washing and wiping the feet of the apostles.³⁹

This gesture of service-in-friendship initiates reconciliation, giving as it does an opening for a hurting people to find a listening ear for their painful stories. As the missionary bends, he listens to the stories with an open heart and an unassuming attitude. This initiates communion towards engaging the issue of justice. The initiator should always remember that God's mission is to reconcile human community, establishing a situation in which differences are promoted and celebrated, and where human beings live in harmony with nature, with each other and with God.⁴⁰

The gesture also initiates "prophetic dialogue," a term used by the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) to mean dialogue in the

³⁸ Aloysius Pieres, SJ, "Jesus and Mary as Portrayed by Buddhist Artists," http://www.dimmid.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC=%B65FAD4AD-90A2-4BDC-8FBF-50FFE0B45C86%7D.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ World Council of Churches, "Participating in God's Mission of Reconciliation," A Resource for Churches in Situations of Conflicts, 22. Geneva: http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/vi-church-and-world/Faith-and-Order-201?set_language=en.

context of Asia where the notion of Christianity is not yet popular.⁴¹ The dialogical nature of the washing of the feet follows the notion that God is dialogical from the very beginning.⁴²

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI stated that the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life. He observed that modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers. Given the Ranong context, evangelizing through words is substantially not the first option. Washing of the feet can be a powerful tool to allow missionaries to enter into the realm of the migrants' vulnerability. Like Jesus, the missionaries should be a living witness of the love and mercy of God by identifying themselves with them, ready to hear and retell their stories of pain and struggles.

For Marists, in particular, we profess that "we must think as Mary, judge as Mary, feel and act as Mary in all things."⁴³ This is an approach of life and in "doing the project of Mary,"⁴⁴ the emphasis not being on Marian devotion but in living like Mary with the faith and attitudes that she bears.⁴⁵

In "The Magnificat," Mary prophetically proclaims God's liberation for the oppressed people everywhere. In the midst of cruelty and oppression, Mary "proclaims that God's mercy and justice will be finally victorious."⁴⁶ Thus, anchoring in "The Magnificat," the missionaries are called to be witnesses, to share the loving and merciful presence of God among the Myanmar migrants. Yet above all, to be a witness among them is to become an instrument of reconciliation, not only to the suffering and wounded Myanmar migrants, but also to the local Thai society that has been tainted by the culture of mistrust and an oppressive environment.

⁴¹Stephen Bevans, SVD, "Mission as Prophetic Dialogue," Washington Religious Formation Conference, http://www.relforcon.org/sites/default/files/Transform_Wkshp-MISSION_AS_PROPHETIC_DIALOGUE-final.pdf.

⁴²Gerard Hall, SM, "Marist Mission as Prophetic Dialogue," 34. http://www.mariststudies.org/4/43/7_FN14_Hall_Dislogue.pdf.

⁴³Constitution of the Society of Mary (Rome, 1988), no. 228, 86. These words are attributed to the Venerable Jean Claude Colin, SM, one of the founders of the Society of Mary. He founded the Marist Fathers.

⁴⁴While her mission is not separated from the mission of Jesus, she does the mission of Jesus in her own personal way as the Mother of Mercy.

⁴⁵Marist Fathers, "Marist Spirituality," <http://www.maristfathers.ie/spirituality/>.

⁴⁶Hall, "Marist Mission as Prophetic Dialogue," 40.

POSTSCRIPT

Understanding the hybrid existence of Myanmar migrants in the framework of the diasporic Jews and the perceived pastoral care of the Church to migrants can help missionaries in establishing a possible missiological paradigm in approaching the powerless migrants in Ranong, Thailand.

As a recognized foundation in Thailand, the Marist mission moves towards a more secure sustainability in its evangelical work. It must avoid being tagged as a humanitarian service provider akin to the many NGOs currently working in the area. This is why the missiological paradigm of washing of the feet must be internalized to position the MAF as witnessing and living in solidarity with the oppressed and forgotten in Ranong. It is in this context that Marists are invited to put on the towel around their waist, bend down, wash, and wipe the feet of these migrants with HIV/AIDS who experience isolation and rejection from the community.

This paradigm will help the Marist missionaries define their missiology to the Myanmar migrants. At the same time, this will distinguish its work from the services that other NGOs provide.

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