



## Journeying with the Youth: Stories as Mission Frontiers

### ABSTRACT

*The ministry to the young can be more effective when there is “nearness and proximity.” It must include listening to stories for it is the beginning of evangelization. This paper is a story of a missionary who in his immersion had accompanied the young people of the Integral Educational Academy in Sri Lanka. It narrates his adventures in journeying with the youth and how he was able to creatively connect with them through their diaries and daily interactions despite the cultural barriers. Inspired by his experience, he then proceeds to theologially reflect on the Church’s missionary mandate to journey with the youth which entails confronting the manifold challenges that young people face today.*

Keywords: Youth ministry, Stories, Narrative, Dialogue, Integral, Formation, Sri Lanka

### INTRODUCTION

The Redemptorist Congregation’s missionary thrust of giving priority in journeying with the Youth this quadrennium<sup>1</sup> and this year’s celebration of the Year of the Youth have inspired

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<sup>1</sup>Communicanda 1. *Revitalizing our Vita Apostolica: Priorities for Restructuring for Mission* (Rome: 2017), 18.



me to reflect on my journey with the Sri Lankan youth in the Integral Educational Academy. It is an essential task on the part of the church to continually find ways on how to effectively do its ministry to people, especially the young. The church's mission is to bring the message of the Gospel alive in the lives of people, both young and old, not only in words but most notably in actions. As Bryant L. Myers beautifully put it:

*They must be learners who are always seeking new insights from Scripture, from the community and development research. They must be people who document, who ask questions, who listen to the stories of the people, and who spend time with the people in reflection. There must be a passion for discovering meaning. What have we learned? What worked? What did not? What did we miss? What is God saying to us in all this?*<sup>2</sup>

The greatest challenge therefore for those who are called to ministry in the church nowadays is to live the message of the Gospel in their lives. It is an invitation for ministers to become genuine witnesses of the Gospel. The message of love, mercy, and compassion should first and foremost be seen and felt in the life of those who serve the church, for as the old saying goes: *nemo dat quod non habet*.<sup>3</sup>

I arrived in Sri Lanka on July 14, 2018. I was anxious because being sent in a mission for the first time on an alien soil was literally stepping into the unknown. However, the feeling of excitement for new encounters and new experiences kept me moving. On October 4, 2018, after spending two months of working with Caritas Sethmini,<sup>4</sup> the bishop of Ratnapura, Rt. Rev. Dr. Cletus

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<sup>2</sup>Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 226.

<sup>3</sup>An old Latin dictum which literally means “no one gives what they don't have”.

<sup>4</sup>Caritas Sethmini is the Social Arm of the Diocese of Ratnapura whose mission in the social field is based on the Gospel values and universal solidarity towards all members in the diocese. Its office is located in Eheliyagoda, Sri Lanka.

Chandrasiri Perera, OSB decided to send me to Buluthota for a new assignment.

## THE MINISTRY: INTEGRAL EDUCATIONAL ACADEMY

### *The Integral Educational Academy*

Responding to the signs of times and pressing needs of Sri Lankan society in terms of social transformation, the Diocese of Ratnapura established the Integral Educational Academy in 2010 — a ministry that provides an avenue where the young can be formed. The academy is dedicated to facilitating the young to discover inner potentialities through life education with particular emphasis on the English Language, organizing them to work together in cell-group dynamics to face the modern challenges. This concern and commitment in the holistic formation of young people are expressed in the academy's motto which is an adaptation from St. Irenaeus<sup>5</sup> famous line "the glory of God is man fully alive."<sup>6</sup> Fr. Emil Fernando<sup>7</sup> expressed that helping in the formation of young people is at the heart of the life of the church which entails patience, understanding, and compassion on the part of the minister. He pointed out that one must be willing to embrace changes and explore new approaches to be effective in the said ministry. He said that the ministry is actually helping the country (Sri Lanka) in forming God-fearing and responsible citizens and future leaders.

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<sup>5</sup>St. Irenaeus is one of holy fathers of the Roman Catholic Church whose writings entitled him to a high place among the fathers of the Church, for they not only laid the foundations of Christian theology but, by exposing and refuting the errors of the Gnostics, they delivered the Catholic Faith from the real danger of those heretics. See [https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint\\_id=291](https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=291) (accessed July 17, 2019).

<sup>6</sup>"The glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God. If the revelation of God through creation already brings life to all living beings on the earth, how much more will the manifestation of the Father by the Word bring life to those who see God" (AH IV, 20, 7). See <http://www.ewtn.com/library/theology/irenaeus.htm> (accessed July 17, 2019).

<sup>7</sup>Fr. Emil Fernando is a member of the Diocesan Clergy of Ratnapura. As a young priest, he became the pioneering director of the Integral Educational Academy since it started its operation in 2010.

### *The Program*

Like any other institutions, the Integral Educational Academy has several areas of emphases in its formation.

1. *Intellectual formation.* This focuses on the development of the students in terms of their proficiency in English Language. Selected competent priests come to the academy to teach the students in the area of oral and written English as well as listening, understanding, speech, and expression. Strict observance of study periods is emphasized in the academy. The academy also provides books, magazines, journals, and other hardbound reading materials for the students to read.
2. *Psychosocial Formation.* Self-awareness activities and counseling are conducted by a dedicated sister from the Religious of the Good Shepherd, Sister Margret Jemabalay. Several activities that facilitate interaction among the students are also facilitated. These activities encourage students to interact with others (Sinhalese to Tamils, Tamils to Sinhalese). The students work in a cell-group dynamics which is designed to develop interpersonal skills and instill the value of teamwork. A set of officers each week is assigned to lead and animate the whole group which aims at discovering and developing their leadership skills and talents. Musical instruments such as guitar, bongo, and keyboards are also made available which help them develop their musical and social skills.
3. *Values Formation.* The academy is also dedicated to helping young boys develop values and habits that are proper to them. Punctuality in meetings, practices, classes, in the celebration of the holy mass and all other activities are strictly emphasized.

Learning to do household chores is an essential part of the academy's life. Students are taught basic things such as fixing their bed upon rising in the morning, cleaning the house, washing the dishes, doing laundry and the like.

4. *Physical Formation.* To promote the physical well-being of students, they are required to participate in daily sports activities such as volleyball, badminton, and cricket. Invitational or friendship games between the village people and students are also organized.

Part and parcel in the academy's formation is manual labor, which at the present age is set aside due to a sedentary lifestyle greatly influenced by technological advancements. As an article explains, "The evolution of technology has reached a point where pretty much anything is available at the touch of a button. Shopping, learning, working, and entertainment can all be accessed from the comfort of our own homes, on a train or sat in a cafe."<sup>8</sup>

5. *Spiritual Formation.* One of the key features in the academy's program is the integration of the spiritual aspect in formation. As the "source and summit of the Christian life,"<sup>9</sup> regular mass is celebrated early morning from Mondays to Fridays. On Sundays, the students celebrate mass together with the Tamil parishioners. This provides them an avenue to interact with the parishioners. A small prayer room is designated on the second floor of the academy, which can be utilized for personal prayer. Students are encouraged to spend at least 5 minutes of prayer before they retire at night.

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<sup>8</sup>How technology and inactive lifestyles are changing our children. See <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/technology-inactive-lifestyle-changing-children>. (accessed July 30, 2019).

<sup>9</sup>Second Vatican Council, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, 21 November, 1964," in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1975), sec. 11.

Meditations on Saturdays are also conducted which help students develop the ability to focus. A good number of students in their diaries wrote the benefits that they enjoy in doing meditations.

### *Challenges*

My whole experience in journeying with young boys in the Integral Educational Academy was not a bed of roses. The students' inability to follow simple instructions was a recurring issue. Working as a team in this ministry, the director would often call for a meeting to discuss issues and update the team regarding the situation of the academy.

One of the significant issues we have encountered during the Advance Level batch was the use of illegal drugs. Eleven students were found guilty of using illegal drugs. After careful deliberation as to what decision to make regarding those who were found guilty, the concerned students were asked to surrender the illegal drugs. Fr. Emil said in one of our meetings "though the act is a grave offense in the academy's policy, perhaps this is the reason why these students are sent here so we can be of help to them."

### *The Diaries*

To enhance the writing skills of students in English, each one of them are required to write daily entries in their diary during the whole duration of the course. These diaries are checked for grammar corrections and returned to the students. We ask students to write something about what transpired during the day and how they felt, or something about what's close to their heart or what interests them. Naturally, the entries in their diaries disclosed their personal stories. Most of them wrote about their struggles in life, shortcoming and difficulties. The diaries became an instrument not just to help the students in enhancing their writing skills but most notably to help them in their struggles ranging from personal, familial to social problems in life. Though being with them in most activities during the day helped me see the behavior

of students, it was through the diaries that I came to know their real and wounded selves. This helped me better understand their plight, why they behaved in such ways. What seemed to be just a means to enhance their writing skills turned out to be a tool in ministering to the young.

## THE CHURCH AND HER MISSION

The world that we have known has changed so rapidly that we, most of the time, fail to cope up with it and assimilate its changes. Many people express their lamentations that it is not anymore the same world they knew before. These rapid changes and developments have also impacted not only the life of an individual but also the life of the church. This part of the paper looks into the context where the church is currently situated and explores how can the church bring God's message of love and compassion to her children especially the youth.

### *Where we are: Socio-Spiritual Landscape The Face of Poverty*

It is evident that we live in a world of “haves and have nots.” There is a widening gap between the rich and the poor spawning a kind of mentality which says “if you have money, you are somebody, and if you have no money, you are nobody.” Rich countries are becoming more prosperous while developing countries are becoming poor. William Bausch<sup>10</sup> in his book *The Parish of the Next Millenium* cites,

*An emerging global elite, mostly urban-based and interconnected in a variety of ways, is amassing great wealth and power, while more than half of humanity is left out. We still have more than half the people on the planet with incomes of less than two dollars a day*

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<sup>10</sup>William J. Bausch is a retired pastor and nationally recognized speaker, storyteller and a workshop leader. He authored several books on Catholic ministry, history, and pastoral practice. He is the 1996 recipient of the President's Award from the National Federation of Priests' Councils.

– more than a billion people. For poor people in this two-class world, it is a breeding ground for hopelessness, for anger, for frustration.<sup>11</sup>

Poverty is a glaring reality in Asia. “Asia is a rich continent, but it is a continent of poor people. Poverty in Asia has a human face... it also has a human form, a human body.”<sup>12</sup> People have been deprived of basic human rights, which are necessary for them to decide their life. Economic policies are constructed in such a way that favors politicians, affluent and influential elites of the society. In Sri Lanka for instance, poverty is too glaring. This reality of the world’s economic imbalance does not only widen the gap between peoples but also creates a sense of powerlessness and manipulation, insecurities, and uncertainties.

### *A Highly Secularized World*

Our age is best characterized by *secularism*.<sup>13</sup> Ronald Rolheiser<sup>14</sup> defines it, first, “by narcissism or excessive self-absorption manifested by a high individualism that makes one incapable of recognizing the reality of others.”<sup>15</sup> There is too much emphasis on temporal powers and affairs to the extent that faith which was once at the center of people’s lives are now at the fringes. Secularism has penetrated the lives of people so deep that the Church’s teaching authority is challenged. Corollary to this, our sense of the divine is diminishing. The Church is becoming more and more irrelevant and has nothing to say about social issues in a world dominated by

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<sup>11</sup>William J. Bausch, *The Parish of the Next Millenium* (U.S.A: Twenty Third Publications, 1997), 9.

<sup>12</sup>Edgar G. Javier, SVD, *Dialogue: Our Mission Today* (Quezon City:Claretian Publications and ICLA Publications, 2006), 23.

<sup>13</sup>As defined in the Merriam Webster dictionary is the indifference to, or rejection or exclusion of, religion and religious considerations. Cambridge dictionary defines it as the belief that religion should not be involved with the ordinary social and political activities of the country.

<sup>14</sup>Ronald Rolheiser is a member of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate Congregation. He became the president of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas. He wrote several books like *A Vision for a Deeper Human and Christian Maturity* which won Book of the Year, and Best Book in Spirituality, Catholic Book Awards, 2015. See <https://ronrolheiser.com/about-ron/>, accessed August 15, 2019.

<sup>15</sup>William Bausch, *The Parish of the Next Millenium*, 25.



secularist mentality. In the Philippines, for example, the question of separation of church and state comes to the fore.

### *The Digital Age and Social Media*

We owe much of life's comforts from technological advancements. However, if we look closely at how these advancements have negatively impacted our lives, we will be surprised. William Bausch expresses,

*When I was a child, my world was about Sunday dinners, church, school, and farming. Now it's a world about talk shows, cable television, email, nanoseconds, microwave, meals, celebrities and other people far away getting rich. Our children are growing up in a consumer-oriented, electronic community that is teaching them very different values from those we say we value.<sup>16</sup>*

These developments have changed our lifestyle to the extent that traditional values also are jeopardized.

People nowadays are hooked into their gadgets. Being separated from their phones creates anxiety on their part. Indeed, we are in a Digital Age where everything is electronic. Social media platforms are competing with each other to be the best tool for communication and entertainment. Facebook,<sup>17</sup> as a social media platform, has found its way to make people believe that to connect to people, one needs to have it.

The world of the internet has created a reality which is found in emojis, a virtual reality. Janlori Goldman, the editor of the Privacy Journal, says, "The danger of the Internet now is the illusion of anonymity that's completely false. People think they're invisible. It is possible to construct a very detailed profile of your online activities that could be used in a variety of ways."<sup>18</sup> There is

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>17</sup>Facebook is a social networking site that makes it easy for you to connect and share with family and friends online. Originally designed for college students, Facebook was created in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg while he was enrolled in Harvard University. See <https://edu.gcfglobal.org/en/facebook101/what-is-facebook/1/>, accessed August 14, 2019.

<sup>18</sup>Bausch, *The Parish of the Next Millennium*, 20.

no such thing as privacy in this Digital Age. While acknowledging the benefits that this age has contributed to humanity, Pope Francis also explains its limitations and deficiencies. He says “the digital environment is also one of loneliness, manipulation, exploitation, and violence, even to the extreme case of the ‘dark web.’ Digital media can expose people to the risk of addiction, isolation, and gradual loss of contact with concrete reality, blocking the development of authentic interpersonal relationships.”<sup>19</sup>

### *Mediaspection: Attuned to Noise*

William Bausch describes secularism as “unbridled restlessness and compulsion.”<sup>20</sup> This is indeed very evident when one observes society nowadays. On our way to Buluthota one day, we decided to stop over a coffee shop along Permadula road. There were customers inside the coffee shop hooked into their laptops and wearing headsets while at the background, loud music was being played. I stumbled upon the same scenario when I was walking the streets of Negombo and entered one of its famous coffee shops. Loud music was being played. Silence has become a thing of the past nowadays. “It seems that many cannot abide silence. They need constant narcotic of noise and movement to keep them from what they fear: life’s meaninglessness.”<sup>21</sup> The students in the academy manifested this “unbridled restlessness and compulsion.” They are not attuned to silence. Sometimes they get sleepy once they are asked to stay put and be alone by themselves. Others find ways on how to break the silence by talking to others.

Aside from the internet, people, especially the young, are more inclined to stationary activities such as watching TV, Netflix, Youtube, etc. These activities have serious repercussions. Sam Keen writes:

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<sup>19</sup>Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit: Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation for the Young and the Entire People of God*. See [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20190325\\_christus-vivit.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html) (accessed September 14, 2019).

<sup>20</sup>Bausch, *The Parish of the Next Millennium*, 29.

<sup>21</sup>Bausch, *The Parish of the Next Millennium*, 29.

*The danger of the TV age is that mediaspection is replacing introspection: prepackaged dreams programmed by merchants who want us to buy their products and propagandists who want to rule our minds and destroy the silence and fertile darkness which is necessary for us to listen to the voices of our intimate fantasies. The more fascinating TV becomes, the more likely we are to wake up one day and find that we forgot to live.<sup>22</sup>*

All the above mentioned and many more have all contributed to a diminishing sense of what is spiritual and of what is sacred, and the ability of an individual to self-introspect.

### *Cultural Diversity*

We live in a world which does not have only many but also diverse cultures. This diversity of cultures also brings with it diverse ways of life that have been nurtured and sustained. Often this becomes a source of conflict and tension among people. This does not only affect the society but also the “selfhood of individuals, as active subjects and agents of their history, tradition, and values.”<sup>23</sup>

Sri Lanka is known for its multiethnic and multireligious society. Sri Lanka has undergone difficult times in history even after its declaration of independence from the British colonial rule in 1948. Though the issue concerning the civil war was political<sup>24</sup> by nature, nevertheless it has affected all other aspects of life. “The conflict created widespread displacement and resulted in up to 100,000 deaths. Moreover, as many people fear publicly discussing the civil conflict, expressions of concern and mourning have been somewhat limited to the private sphere. This has meant that, for many Sri Lankan families and households, the civil conflict

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid, 45

<sup>23</sup>Javier, *Dialogue: Our Mission Today*, 25.

<sup>24</sup>The “Sinhalese Only” movement emerged as a way to define the national identity of Sri Lanka which resulted to the marginalization of non-Sinhala and non-Buddhists and limited access to state-controlled opportunities and benefits. This resulted to the birth of a small group known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which began the civil war.

continues to evoke unreconciled grief and sorrow.”<sup>25</sup> Though the Sri Lankan government declared victory over the twenty-six-year long civil conflict in 2009, the relations between the Sinhalese and Tamils in the political and social arenas may be tense.

The students of the academy are composed of Tamil and Sinhalese students. Remnants of the so-called “unreconciled grief and sorrow” are still felt among the students in the academy. The director of the academy, aware of this, constantly reminded the students to mingle with others. Going with one’s ethnic group is never allowed in the academy. In one occasion, one Sinhalese student escaped from the academy and went home. The parents of the concerned student informed us about the reason why his son left the academy. The reason was “why would a Tamil brother discipline me?” Such statement caught my attention. The effects of the turbulent times of the past left a mark in the psyche of people of Sri Lanka that are easily triggered even by the minutest comment.

Situating ourselves in all these, how can the church, in the words of Niel John Capidos “remain steadfast to her identity and yet still be relevant to the pressing realities of a secularized and urbanized world?”<sup>26</sup>

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

### *Spirituality*

The book *Nourishing the Soul: Discovering the Sacred in Everyday Life* begins with these words:

*Until recently, the twentieth century might have been viewed as the century in which as the century in which Western culture lost its soul. Sacrificing attention to the*

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<sup>25</sup>“Sri Lankan Culture”, Cultural Atlas. Cultural Atlas is a collaborative project between SBS, International Education Services (IES) and multicultural NSW. Created in 2016 as a supplementary resource to the Cultural Competence Program (CCP) it aims to inform and educate the public in cross-cultural attitudes, practices, norms, behaviours and communications. see <https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/sri-lankan-culture/sri-lankan-culture-core-concepts#sri-lankan-culture-core-concepts>, accessed September 1, 2019.

<sup>26</sup>Niel John Capidos, “*Urban Faith Transits: Tactical Spaces in the Everyday Ordinary*” (unpublished Master’s Synthesis, Saint Alphonsus Theological and Mission Institute, Davao City, Philippines, 2017), 3.

*inner life for the pursuit of outer life, we have become obsessed with money, convenience, and the illusion of immortality. But while the evidence of a shrinking sense of spiritual is all around us – most apparent in the lack of respect for the value of human life demonstrated by the rise of violent crime, the diminished concern for the poor and homeless, and the glamorization of war – there remains a conscientious group of thinkers who have always kept their eyes on the less measurable though nonetheless real, aspects of our existence. In recent years there has been a resurgence of attention to the inner life.*<sup>27</sup>

The influence of the prevailing culture of western society “with its focus upon technology and its excessive use of reason, has brought about an impoverishment of the spiritual life of individuals.”<sup>28</sup> The greatest challenge nowadays in the area of formation, particularly of the Integral Educational Academy, is how to create a structure or program which will respond to the challenges of the present culture and mentality of people. Chapter Four of William J. Bauch’s book *The Parish of the Next Millenium* speaks of his proposals on how to bring about a spirituality that will encourage new life, and some of its points will be discussed in this paper.

Spirituality for Bausch is the impulse and the vision point for the “renewal and must begin from the grassroots level where people will speak to their leaders, and leaders will do well their time and conversation at the grassroots – dialogue.”<sup>29</sup> Large confrontation renewal does not anymore ring a bell to people these days. Renewal should come from below. This I believe resonates to what Confucius was saying, “to put the world right in order,

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<sup>27</sup>Anne Adamcewiz Simpkinson, Charles H. Simpkinson, Rose Solari. *Nourishing the Soul: Discovering the Sacred in Everyday Life* (U.S.A.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 1.

<sup>28</sup>Maria L. Santa Maria, *Growth through Meditation and Journal Writing* (New York:Paulist Press, 1983), 1.

<sup>29</sup>Bausch, *The Parish of the Next Millenium*, 92.

we must first put the nation in order; to put the nation in order, we must first put the family in order; to put the family in order, we must first cultivate our personal life; we must first set our hearts right.”<sup>30</sup>

### *A Holistic Program*

The goal of any educational program should not merely be the acquisition of knowledge and skills. It must aim for the development of the whole person, which comprises the intellectual, emotional, social, physical, and spiritual aspects of human existence. A holistic program will “help the youth in the training of themselves, and provide them with the challenges which help them to develop to full human maturity.”<sup>31</sup> Having this kind of program facilitates the growth of the whole person wherein one can make connections to these aspects and the relevance of these aspects in one’s life. *Gravissimum Educationis* says that,

*Christian education does not merely strive for the maturing of a human person... but has as its principal purpose this goal: that the baptized, while they are gradually introduced the knowledge of the mystery of salvation, become ever more aware of the gift of Faith they have received and that they learn in addition how to worship God the Father in spirit and truth (cf. John 4:23) especially in liturgical action, and be conformed in their personal lives according to the new man created in justice and holiness of truth (Eph. 4:22-24); also that they develop into perfect manhood, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ (cf. Eph. 4:13) and strive for the growth of the Mystical Body; moreover, that aware of their calling, they learn not only how to bear witness to the hope that is in them (cf. Peter 3:15)*

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<sup>30</sup>Albert E. Alejo, SJ, *Ehemplo: Spirituality of Shared Integrity in Philippine Church and Society* (Philippines: Institute of Spirituality in Asia, 2010), 87.

<sup>31</sup>Anthony Castle, *The Pastoral Care of Young People* (England: Mayhew-McCrimmon LTD., 1972), 7.

*but also how to help in the Christian formation of the world that takes place when natural powers viewed in the full consideration of man redeemed by Christ contribute to the good of the whole society.*<sup>32</sup>

The world of secularism has resulted to a polarization of what used to be interconnected aspects of human life. In looking at the Jewish tradition, the scholar and the saint are one, Bausch comments that “the academic and the spiritual life can never be separated, which is why there is a Jewish saying that says, *No table is blessed if there is not a scholar to eat at it.*”<sup>33</sup>

### *Emphasis on Silence, Meditation and Prayer*

Henry Nouwen believes that most people have lost the very center and source of human existence and have become “strangers in our own house... we avoid confrontation with our deepest selves,” and therefore we avoid solitude.<sup>34</sup> Solitude, according to Maria L. Santa-Maria<sup>35</sup> is the “space which nourishes, which allows for the birth of the new creation or the newly transformed self.”<sup>36</sup> The students in the academy would claim that by doing so, they experienced peace of mind, and has helped their sense of focus. In addition, an increase in their appreciation for nature was evident. Pope Francis in chapter V of his post synodal apostolic exhortation *Christus Vivit*, encourages the youth to enjoy the small everyday blessings and having a constant friend in Jesus. For Pope Francis “prayer is both a challenge and an adventure... Prayer enables us to share with him every aspect of our lives and to rest confidently

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<sup>32</sup>Gravissimum Educationis, see [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_gravissimum-educationis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_gravissimum-educationis_en.html), accessed August 19, 2019.

<sup>33</sup>William J. Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith* (U.S.A.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1999), 78.

<sup>34</sup>Henry Nouwen, *Creative Ministry* (New York: Paulist Press, 1971), 71.

<sup>35</sup>Dr. Maria L. Santa-Maria is a psychotherapist in private practice in St. Petersburg, Florida. She has a B.A. in Psychology from Ohio Dominican College, an M.A. in Counseling Therapy from Ohio State University, and a Doctor of Ministry degree from San Francisco Theological Seminary.

<sup>36</sup>Santa-Maria, *Growth through Meditation and Journal Writing*, 36.

in his embrace. At the same time, it gives us a share in his own life and love.”<sup>37</sup>

This resonates with St. Augustine’s famous dictum, which says, “our hearts are made for Thee, and they are restless until they rest in Thee.” Thus, it is part of human nature and innate to human beings to search for the ultimate meaning of life’s existence. The world that we are in has made us individualistic and detached from the sacred. Maria L. Santa-Maria in her book *Growth through Meditation and Journal Writing* says,

*The journey to the deepest part of ourselves involves three aspects: an engagement with oneself, an engagement with God, and an engagement with others. Only by engaging in all three movements can one correct the imbalance of a life lacking meaning and purpose.*<sup>38</sup>

### *A More Inclusive Approach*

Religious pluralism in Asia is both a gift and task. Since Vatican II, there is a growing awareness of the need for the church to dialogue with other religions. Mission in the church also includes “the whole of Christian outreach to those outside the Church.”<sup>39</sup>

“We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God. Man’s relation to God, the Father, and his relation to men his brothers are so linked together that Scripture says: *He who does not love does not know God.* (1 John 4:8).”<sup>40</sup> This forms the basis of our understanding that the whole of the human race belongs to one family – the family of God. No one can claim love of God while despising his brothers and sisters.

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<sup>37</sup>Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit: Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation for the Young and the Entire People of God*. See [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20190325\\_christus-vivit.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html), accessed September 14, 2019.

<sup>38</sup>Santa Maria, *Growth through Meditation and Journal Writing*, 10.

<sup>39</sup>Edgar G. Javier, SVD, *Dialogue: Our Mission Today*, 8.

<sup>40</sup>James Kroeger, ed., *Nostra Aetate, Documents of Vatican Council II* (Philippines: Paulines Publishing House, 2011), 756.



Mission in the church nowadays is not anymore so much about converting people as it is about being in dialogue with different cultures and faith traditions. Bausch quoted Sister Marie Lumas who spoke at the Heartland Conference in Kansas in 1996. She said that part of the work of ministry is building community and you, “don’t invite people to join a program; you invite them to help you build it from scratch. ...We are not about the business of making Catholics but about helping people to see the presence, the activity, the power of God in the world.”<sup>41</sup> Father Francis Case, SJ as quoted by Bausch, puts it:

*God communicates with the world in infinite ways. Christians believe we have the fullness of God’s revelation, but our conviction should also be characterized by humility. Our knowledge does not exhaust the infinity of God’s manifestations. God is at work everywhere in the world – even in different religions and cultures.*<sup>42</sup>

#### *Individual Narratives as Starting Point in Ministry*

William Bausch, in his book *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*, says that “ministry to others and for others really begins at the intersection between God and his people revealed in their stories and conversations.”<sup>43</sup> More often than not, a common conception of ministry is that it is seen as *servicing* others, of doing something concrete. But part and parcel of ministering to others is a simple yet challenging task of attentively listening to the other, journeying with the sacred stories of people. In doing ministry, one must “seek to enter into peoples conversations and stories.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Bausch, *The Parish of the Next Millennium*, 221.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>43</sup>William J. Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith* (U.S.A: Twenty Third Publications, 1999), 62.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 62.

My initial experience with the two batches of young boys in the academy was that they were not open to express or disclose their emotions and stories, something cultural. Sri Lankan children as they grow are expected to develop a “sense of *lajjawa*, a feeling that combines shyness, shame, modesty, and fear.”<sup>45</sup> This is closely connected with the Sri Lankan concept of the *face*. Perhaps, this has something to do also with Sri Lankan concept of the face. “Face refers to one’s reputation, dignity, and honor.”<sup>46</sup>

Providential as I called it, I was able to find a way to know the stories of these boys. The diary became an instrument for me to enter into their world and to see where they are coming from. Father Pat Brennan as quoted by William Bausch says, “Evangelization begins with listening to people – hearing their stories, their needs, their woundedness, for once people have their woundedness and their needs listened to, they discover a deeper need: the need for meaning.”<sup>47</sup>

Reading the diaries of the students made me see their journey of faith, and their realizations about life. Reading their stories can be an enriching experience, an eye-opener which widens one’s horizon. Choan-Seng Song writes<sup>48</sup>, “But in stories I find my theological space expands. To read stories of people outside the Christian Church – their myths, legends, and real-life stories – is a liberating experience.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Countries and their Cultures, see <https://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Sri-Lanka.html>, accessed September 2, 2019.

<sup>46</sup>“*Sri Lankan Culture*”, Cultural Atlas, <https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/sri-lankan-culture/sri-lankan-culture-core-concepts#sri-lankan-culture-core-concepts> (accessed September 1, 2019).

<sup>47</sup>Bausch, *The Parish of the Next Millennium*. 223.

<sup>48</sup>Choan-Seng Song is a professor of theology and Asian Cultures at the Pacific School of Religion and Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. He has authored over ten books and numerous articles.

<sup>49</sup>Peter C. Phan, and Jung Young Lee, eds. *Journeys at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 19.

## CONCLUSION

Journeying with the youth is an indispensable part of the church's life and ministry. In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, "Christus Vivit," Pope Francis expresses his hopes, convictions, and invitations towards the youth of today, and the vital role that elders play in helping them. Pope Francis begins his exhortation by recounting the several young people in the Old Testament and New Testament whose lives can be a source of inspiration to us. He emphasizes the pivotal role that a family plays in society.

The motto which serves as the guiding principle of the academy says that "The Glory of God is Man Fully Alive" coincides with Pope Francis' post-synodal apostolic exhortation "Christus Vivit." It is indeed true that Christ brings life in the church. Pope Francis says,

*He (Christ) is our hope, and in a wonderful way he brings youth to our world, and everything he touches becomes young, new, full of life. The very first words, then, I would like to say to every young Christian are these, Christ is alive, and he wants you to be alive!<sup>50</sup>*

Youth Ministry demands that we go beyond what is familiar. It must go to popular places where young people already are. The program should provide a venue where what is being taught cognitively is experienced in actual everyday life experiences. A structure should be welcoming and be like real home and family to young people.

The ministers play a vital role in the whole endeavor. Their attitude must be like the loving father whose "stubborn" love never wavers despite adversity. He/She must go beyond merely doing what the day requires of him or what is expected of him and must transcend his comfort zones. A minister must look at himself as a co-pilgrim who journeys along with others. The key

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<sup>50</sup>Pope Francis, "Christus Vivit": Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to the Young and to the Entire People of God. Vatican Website. See [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20190325\\_christus-vivit.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html) (accessed on September 14, 2019).

to a meaningful and fruitful ministry is proximity or nearness as Pope Francis would emphasize.

What I learned about journeying with the young students in the academy is that to journey with them means to journey with their sacred stories. St. Alphonsus says that “the paradise of God is the heart of man.”<sup>51</sup> This is not an easy thing to do in a culture that is not accustomed to disclosing one’s struggles and feelings. It was providential that the diaries became instrumental in journeying with their stories. As Pope Francis would emphasize “Youth ministry needs to become more flexible: inviting young people to events or occasions that provide an opportunity not only for learning but also for conversing, celebrating, singing, listening to real stories and experiencing a shared encounter with the living God.”<sup>52</sup>

Lastly, my experience of journeying with the young people in the academy was a kind of Road to Emmaus<sup>53</sup> experience. It is not only an experience of sharing each other’s stories of joys and sorrows, of victories and failures, and hopes, but most of all, a sharing of the Good News that the experience brings. It is discovering Jesus in the ordinariness of life, in day to day real-life stories of people.

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<sup>52</sup>Pope Francis, “*Christus Vivit*”: Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to the Young and to the Entire People of God. Vatican Website. See [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20190325\\_christus-vivit.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html), accessed on September 14, 2019.

<sup>53</sup>Luke 24:13-35, New Revised Standard Version.

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