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**INTRODUCTION**

It has been said that “*in the beginning God created a garden for humanity to dwell in it*,”[[1]](#footnote-1) but people left the garden and built cities. If the Bible’s Garden of Eden was meant to be humankind’s natural home, history determined otherwise.

The mission is changing. In today’s world the biggest challenges for Gospel witnesses are found in the immense cities of every continent. Myriads of problems can be encountered in slum areas and ghettoes and, as missionaries, we are called to proclaim God’s message among those marginalized by the rest of society. Violence, marginalization, hunger, and fear call us to read these signs of the time for our evangelical task. Poverty and urbanization go hand in hand in the cities! For this reason also John Paul II invited the whole church to rethink the image of “***Missio ad Gentes***:”

“In the modern age, missionary activity has been carried out especially in isolated regions which are far from centers of civilization and which are hard to penetrate because of difficulties of communication, language, or climate. Today the image of mission *ad gentes* is perhaps changing: effort should be concentrated on the big cities, where new customs and style of living arise together with new forms of culture and communication, which then influence the wider population. It is true that the ‘option for the neediest’ means that we should not overlook the most abandoned and isolated human groups, but it is also true that individuals or small groups cannot be evangelized if we neglect the centers where a new humanity, so to speak, is emerging, and where new models of development are taking shape. The future of the younger nations is shaped in the cities.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

This relatively new phenomenon and new missionary situation call us to reflect, to interpret, to deepen our efforts and vision for a new missionary and pastoral presence and ministry in the city, especially in slum areas and ghettoes, the forgotten parts of big cities’ landscape.

With this reflection, based on my 1997 Master of Arts and Master of Divinity Thesis: “The Church and the City, *The Quest for Jesus’ presence in Urban Settings,*”[[3]](#footnote-3) I will try to propose some alternative forms of presence in the ghettoes and slum areas of the cities. The models I will propose go beyond the parish understanding that we are so used to. Forms of presence and ministry in the city have to be focused on being more than doing, in witnessing more than preaching, on sharing more than giving, on learning more than teaching. A true missionary and pastoral presence has to share the uncertainty of daily life that many people experience in ghettoes and slums. It has to fear the violence and feel at least some of the pains poor people experience daily.

What I will propose is not a final solution. It is the beginning of a journey that will need to be perfected and shaped by living experiences. Hopefully, at the end, this journey will lead us to the encounter with the God of life dwelling in the most marginalized and poor areas of our cities.

1. **MISSION TO THE CITY**

The aspect of the world is changing. More and more human beings are becoming urban species. Population and urbanization growth are inter-dependent because of the great “availability” of the cities to absorb the natural increase of population. Rural-urban migration and even immigration are the driving forces underlying changes in urban areas.

Today, human beings are facing an entirely new situation: an urban world is about to see the light. In many countries this has happened already! The consequences are a new life style, social order and type of society which will greatly modify the idea, objectives and strategies of socio-economic development, human promotion and religions. I also believe that we are taking part in the hatching of a new culture, a new religiosity and a new era in the history of humanity.

In the face of all these changes, how can the church make manifest the divine initiative of the Gospel in the concrete situation of the urban world? To paraphrase Paul VI, we can say it calls for a new way of being Christian and of proclaiming the Gospel. There is no easy answer. We must seek together a new way of being witnesses to the Gospel in urban situations. However, in what direction should we seek?

To begin, we have to understand and know the urban situation and the reasons of such an accelerated process of urbanization. In first chapter I will give some ideas about the real causes of rapid urbanization and why this is even more dramatic in the developing countries with the absurdities of shantytowns and slums.[[4]](#footnote-4) I will also analyze some of the challenges the church and society have to face daily in the megalopolises of the industrialized countries. This chapter will also give some understanding to the complexity of the problem of rapid urbanization while, at the same time, trying to see the central role of the city in the world system. To do this, I will focus on some of the hot issues related to the city such as migration and poverty. The questions that arise are related to the reasons why people move to the city, and why there are so many poor people in the city.

**1.1 WHY DO PEOPLE MOVE TO THE CITY?**

Migration to cities is very much an effect of the world economic system. Big cities offer better opportunities than the countryside and they represent a hope for many immigrants. But, in Europe and in North America as in Africa and in Latin America, cities attract but cannot absorb. This is why injustice and inequality are increasingly becoming part of the landscape of many big cities.

“On the one hand, a growing population of the poor hustles in the informal economy and lives in flimsy housing in the far-flung urban periphery. On the other hand, a privileged, well-placed few reap the enormous reward of the new global markets. As those few protect their wealth and buy the services they need, urban policy has become one of accelerated privatization and lowered expectations.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

The concentration of people as well as urban poverty are particularly evident in the megalopolis that seems to attract more people than other cities. In the past, the central role of the city was evident because of the kind of services offered but today it is not so evident. Because of the global economy, big cities are today even more central than in the past but in different ways. Today, the importance of the city in the world economy is expressed more in networks and communications than buildings.

The twentieth-century has been characterized by a gradual integration of nations and regions into a global economic system. It is sufficient to see the supermarket shelves or the clothes tags to realize the globalization process of the world economy. We know also that a relatively small number of cities are continuously mentioned through mass media and business reports. Globalization of economy and the urbanization process have many connections and implications that go beyond what we can see in the supermarket or on the television news. Cities are powerful centers of economic and cultural networks in the contemporary world-system.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Some of the most common reasons that pull people to the city are the desire to improve life through education and to find easier opportunities for employment, health care and other services. Sadly, urban migration in many less developed countries offers not only better services but also more situations of injustice.

“The urban areas, and especially the major cities, invariably offer more and better facilities than their rural hinterlands and provide superior education and training, for the migrant’s children in particular. Expert medical care and drugs can be found. Piped water assures clean water and releases women from the drudgery of fetching water over long distances. Electricity supersedes the kerosene lamp and the open fire. Some migrant eventually find subsidized housing. Here again, there is the serious problem of desegregation. Migrants frequently experience severe discrimination in access to these urban amenities. Indeed, for some, housing and sanitary conditions are worse than where they came from.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Some of the factors that push migration are the political instability of the country, natural disasters, war and poor health care in rural areas especially in poorer countries. The main factor behind migration to the city remains the rural economy and the issue of land.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In Africa, especially in the Eastern Countries, people migrate to the city for other reasons. Aylward Shorter names some of these reasons as factors attracting people to the city:

“For many young men and women, the desire for freedom from social constraints in close-knit rural communities is the primary motive for migration. Curiosity about, or attraction to, urban values, as well as enhanced social status, can also be important. Some migrants move in order to join families in town. This is especially true of wives and children.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

However, economic reasons are of primary importance to most migrants. They do not leave their land, people and culture only for the “bright lights” of the city. Migration entails costs, economic and frequently psychological, as well as risks.

Migrants and the poorest communities in the cities are isolated at the periphery in developing countries or practically imprisoned in inner-city ghettos in the big cities of the developed nations. For example, in Chicago or in most of the major cities in the United States, segregation by race is not only very marked, but is also emphasized and connected with segregation by class. There are invisible but real barriers between one neighborhood and another or between inner-city and suburbs. This is also an impediment to improving one’s life and achieving goals or fulfilling dreams. In fact, where one lives is an important determinant of one’s life chances and barriers to residential mobility are inevitably barriers to social mobility. If one group of people is denied full access to urban housing markets because of skin color, tribe, or ethnic group, then this group is systematically denied access to the full range of benefits in urban society.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Segregation is the fruit of injustice and inequity but also the fruit of a political and economic system that has similar effects in other parts of the world. Again, as ministers, we need to consider more attentively the many situations of marginalization, segregation and increasing poverty in the big city.

**1.2 URBAN POVERTY: A CRY FOR JUSTICE**

There is a very high level of poverty in urban areas of developing countries. According to a recent estimate, approximately 330 million persons, that is 27.7 percent of the total population of developing countries, live below the poverty line.[[11]](#footnote-11) In Africa, which is urbanizing at the extremely rapid rate of 7 percent each year, about 42 percent of the urban population does not have money to buy goods and services considered essential to stay above the poverty line. A little over one-third of the urban population of the East and Middle Europe and Africa (EMENA) which includes several low-middle and upper-middle income countries, is poor.[[12]](#footnote-12) It seems evident that the urban poverty situation will worsen over the years. Urban Estimates indicate that the numbers of the urban poor are projected to increase. For the first time in history more than half the world’s people live in cities. Over 90 percent of urban growth is occurring in the developing world, adding an estimated 70 million new residents to urban areas each year. During the next two decades, the urban population of the world’s two poorest regions—South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa—is expected to double.[[13]](#footnote-13) One of the major issues in the analysis of urban poverty regards employment and the income earning opportunities that should be expanded, particularly in the informal sector which employs most of the urban poor.[[14]](#footnote-14) As I said above, employment and job opportunities are generally one if not the most important reason for migration into the big city and for the movement of people into the city itself.

Unemployment, underemployment and misemployment are more and more part of the picture of the big cities of the world. Even in the United States’ cities, there is a very high number of unemployed and an increasing number of “working poor.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Such conditions are time created by an economic system that maintains power in the hands of a few rich people while it creates more and more people without economic security and all of its consequences.[[16]](#footnote-16) Violence in the city’s streets is not the source but the consequence of situations of injustice. Violence ends when security of jobs is promoted and services are provided for all the people in the city. Inequality and injustice are very much the premises of violence and racism. Inequality and injustice continuously threaten poor people’s security and characterize the crisis of the system of which cities are very much a part.

Clearly a relationship exists between the insecurity of poverty and family structure. Many studies show that female-headed households have a greater chance of being poor than married-couple families and not only in the United States.[[17]](#footnote-17) Most of the time, the crisis in many families is not because of the lack of values or education but because of situations of economic insecurity and urban poverty, as Schiller explains:

“Large families and broken families are among the most salient characteristic of the poor. Over 30% of the families are with at least 5 members, while 1/4 of the poor are in broken families; many of the latter are also from large families... For most of the families in question, poverty prevailed before the family either grew larger or broke up. Moreover, economic insecurity itself may have contributed to the dissolution of the family or to excessive reproduction. Hence stronger causality appears to flow from poverty to family size and status than in the opposite direction.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Real security is found in seeking a society of justice in which the liberation process is the primary goal for individuals, communities and societies.

Such a liberation process is an essential part of the mission in the city because there is no effective announcement of the Good News unless it is done together with a commitment for justice and peace.

**2. BIG CITIES AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM**

Christians in urban centers today cannot afford to ignore the presence of people of other religious traditions whose experience might be very different from Christianity. We are living in a very privileged moment when cities, communities and churches are including more and more cultures. The challenge for the church is to learn to recognize, understand and to communicate with the many differences of the city. The city’s neighborhoods, slums and ghettoes are becoming multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-language and multi-religious. Congregations of all kinds are being forced to deal with very profound changes in religious and urban restructuring. Pluralism is unquestionably an urban phenomenon. Mosques and temples are becoming a visible part of the landscape of many cities in Africa, Europe and in the United States. Buddhist and Hindu centers are located in every metropolitan area of the world, including Latin-America. In Chicago there are 250,000 Muslims with 25 large mosques and at least 90 religious organizations of various types, 80,000 Buddhists with 32 temples, and a similar number of Hindus and a dozen temples.[[19]](#footnote-19) It is amazing to go along the streets of many neighborhoods in Chicago and to notice churches or other places of worship located in each block. In Nairobi, the different sects are longing daily for places where worship. For this reason, any available space is rapidly transformed into a church. In any big city, people commute everywhere to worship. The commuting life style is already common to those in the city who continuously travel to meet other people for work, shopping and school.

However, religious pluralism that exists in both cities and local communities does not mean that cultural differences are forgotten. Actually, the process of articulation and reformulation of cultural identity is the major function for ethnic minorities and marginal people.[[20]](#footnote-20) Moreover, inclusive communities are conceiving a new kind of religious dialogue based on the recognition of diversities and are building bridges through a common vision.

After what has been said, we realize that the cities are a chaotic collection of vast problems that change daily. Can we do more than identify some of the principal problems from a missionary-pastoral point of view which presupposes a specifically Christian theological vision of the city? Is there a theology of the city? Should we condemn the monstrous city as a place of human arrogance?

The situations are so different! In developed countries the old cities are declining in a context of de-Christianization. In the cities of developing countries the role of the church varies considerably: in some it is in the majority and plays a role of social integration. In other cities the church is only a tiny minority, with a context of different religions and unable to influence the urban problems.

What kind of missionary-pastoral care and pastoral theology could be common to such different situations? No general pastoral guide can be adapted to fit all these different situations. Each Christian Community and Local Church has to start from the beginning, interpreting its presence and activity, and the signs of its own time.

We need a spirit of initiative, a sense of humor and peace. This spirit will lead us to a variety of missionary-pastoral programs emerging from the dialogue between the needs of the people in the urban area and the talents, creativity and spirituality of missionary-pastoral team members.

It seems to me that the growth of the world cities is not the major problem. Urban migration is not the cause of the problem but the consequence.[[21]](#footnote-21) Injustice in today’s global economic system has its negative effects in the uncontrolled concentration on megalopolises and slums in particular. The roots of the problem are in the economy and politics which are based on exclusion and segregation.[[22]](#footnote-22) There is no solution to urban poverty unless we consider who in the city and the world needs justice and liberation. In fact, we understand the nature of the poverty in the city only if we have a clear vision of the global economy. Ghettoes and slums are the consequences of injustice, unemployment and poverty.

For this reason the big cities need new kinds of communities and relationships where diversities are respected and valued. We need to reflect more on the necessity of new kinds of encounters and relationships in the city where the poor can recognize their power of transformation for themselves, the church and the city. Poor people have certainly very different perspective of life and of the city, but they are also those who show the inadequacies of many governmental programs and church pastoral plans. Welcoming and promoting minorities’ human rights and cultures will help the city to rediscover its true face, the face of God. Missionaries in the city need to become able to discern the injustice of economic structures if they want to be part of the solution. Authentic missionaries in the cities of today’s world need to be able to hear the cry of the poor for justice in order to become authentic witnesses of the man of Nazareth.

**2.1 THE SEARCH FOR GOD IN THE CITY**

One of the first steps we need to take to be witnesses of the Gospel in the city is to know the reality around us. True and prepared ministers take time to analyze and study, with a pastoral approach, the social situation of the place in which they are called to serve. Social analysis is the study of the environment. Ministers of the Gospel need to engage in social analysis to assist them in their pastoral work. Robert Schreiter has a clear explanation of what social analysis is all about:

“The first characteristic is the importance of social analysis. This involves a description of the environment in which the community find itself, followed by an analysis of its meaning. The description is rarely intended to be total: more often it reflects the problems which are uppermost on the minds of the members of the community: employment, youth, illness and so on. The social analysis, therefore, is focused upon the most pressing issues facing the community. Only rarely are there attempts to analyze the total environment in which the community finds itself.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

The perspective of the urban mission is the perspective of marginality. Jung Young Lee, an Asian-American in United States, offers a very important theological reflection from the margins and on the theology of marginality. In his book, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology*, he defines marginality as itself central. Yong Lee proposes a new model for developing contextual theology without becoming central or dominating. There is no need to move one class, ethnic group or gender to the center because the margin itself is the center and only from the margins comes a real process of transformation.[[24]](#footnote-24) Lee highlights the creative meaning of following Jesus at the margins of the society, history and church.

The theology of marginality that comes from the reflections of Lee is inspired by Jesus’ clear option for marginalized people. Jesus lived always as a marginal Jew[[25]](#footnote-25) even when he ministered in Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish religion. Therefore, true discipleship is to become marginal community, living with those who are marginalized in our urban societies. Jesus is not the fulfillment of King David but of the suffering servant who is the symbol of God’s marginal people. Jesus is not the center as the disciples and the Hebrew people expected. Jesus is a marginal one. Lee identifies Jesus as the turning point for ministry and theology because the marginalized people have become the center, and the excluded the included.

“This is why the creative core of the new center cannot be found by people who seek it. Jesus illustrated, ‘those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it’ (Luke 17:33). Therefore, God is not central to those who seek the center, but God is center to those who seek marginality, because the real center is the creative core, the margin of marginality.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Option for the margins becomes the paradigm for mission and ministry among the poor and in between other centers of economic and political powers. What is considered marginality by the powers of the city becomes the center of action and renewal for urban mission. Those who are at the margins do not substitute the centers of powers but they become the protagonists of a new kind of relationship. Marginality becomes the creative core for a new society in the city. A theology of marginality is based on the evangelical and ecclesial, prophetic and solidary option for the poor, the marginalized, and the excluded.[[27]](#footnote-27) It is because of such a crucial option that many missionaries and churches have moved to the margins initiating new kind of relationships with poor people in the neighborhood.

**2.2 GOD’S MESSENGERS ON THE STREETS**

I believe that our faith has a lot to say and can do a lot in urban situations like those described above. We need to go beyond the image of a distant and judgmental God who is far from the real and concrete life of the people. If we want to meet the real image of God we need to go to those forgotten or ignored by the official history and there we will encounter the God of Jesus Christ. We will never find an aseptic God separated from the daily struggle of the people. We will never encounter God in empty churches or in melancholy liturgies.[[28]](#footnote-28) We will find God incarnated in the suffering and joy of millions of forgotten people. We will find God involved in the struggle for liberation, walking hand in hand with those we consider outcast. The God of the Bible is the God we encounter in our daily walk on the streets: it is the God who loves and cares for those we have excluded from our liturgies and concerns. This is the real and true God because the people of the ghettoes, or those living in the slum areas, will never accept and worship a God who does not hear their cry, who is not afraid of the bullets, or who does not walk with them the unsafe streets of a slum.

A new image of urban ministry in the 21st century is shaped by the life of the neighborhood. Church leaders present in ghettoes and slums of our metropolises are challenged to deal with unprecedented dangers, risk, and opportunities faced everyday by the people in the neighborhoods. Despite so many problems and issues arising from the ghettoes in the cities, there is one very amazing fact. In all the African-American neighborhoods, at least in Chicago, the sign of a church or chapel shines on nearly every block like in Kariobangi and Korogocho in Nairobi, different denominations are rubbing shoulders as they call for hope and strength in the midst of apparent desolation. This is the cry of the people who are thirsty for God’s Word. It is a cry for community, a scream for dreams and a cry to God.

“Authentic urban ministry today needs to reach beyond traditional Sunday school and Church Youth organizations, to address the need of young people, including their need for attractive and challenging alternatives to the many dead ends that seems to be so present in their lives.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

The people of the ghettoes and the slam dwellers seek desperately for a small caring community of faith where everybody knows everybody. They seek not just a church, but a family, a caring and supportive community of faith. Probably, this is one of the reasons that thousands of new churches or “personal” chapels are flourishing and successful.

It is not for me to judge the validity and the reasons for a great number of ministers to create new churches. One thing is sure: they answer a need for God’s Word at hand, a need for God’s concrete and living presence of liberation, from the people of the ghetto to the people of the ghetto. There is the need to live and incarnate, finally, a true theology of liberation.

Christian theology is a theology of liberation. Theology is, or should be, a rational study of being with God in the world, especially in relationship to the situation of oppression and how God’s liberating Good News that is Jesus Christ is communicated. In this context, James Cone, a black Theologian in the United States, has a very good insight:

“In view of the Biblical emphasis on liberation, it seems not only appropriate but necessary to define the Christian community as the community of oppressed which joins Jesus Christ in his fight for the liberation of humankind. The task of Theology, then, is to explicate the meaning of God’s liberating activity so that those who labor under enslaving powers will see that the forces of liberation are the very activity of God.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

**3. BEYOND THE PARISH BOUNDARIES**

Having said all this, I believe we need to explore new ways of ministering in the city. Urban ministry requires a new attitude and a new way of being witnesses of the Gospel. It is important to explore new way of ministering to the people and new way of being church. One idea is fundamental, to be with the people, where they are. In the environment of ghettoes and slum areas, it is absurd to work for the people and not with them. We cannot be mercenaries of the Gospel who just preach or administer the sacraments. What we need is a true imitation of Christ. We need to be incarnated in the reality of ghettoes and slum areas. This means that, as ministers, we cannot preach against oppression or marginalization without being, at least in part, oppressed and marginalized. We cannot preach against violence if we do not experience some of the fear and the uncertainty of the ghetto’s nights.[[31]](#footnote-31) Moreover, we cannot preach about liberation if we do not allow ourselves to be liberated from within. If it is true that liberation is not an afterthought, but the essence of the divine activity, we need to experience it.

Ministry in urban contexts has to be a ministry of presence. It is important to be present where life takes place, and be witness of God’s love and care. The best way of being a minister in the big city is to make ours the words of the late Cardinal Bernardin: “Go out and proclaim the Gospel, sometimes using words too.”

The entire church is challenged to become neighbor-church, a church who takes an active part in the life and struggle of the people. To do so, many urban churches have given more attention to young people who seem to have great possibility for leadership and inculturation in the neighborhood. In order to facilitate this process of transformation of an absent-church to a relational-church, we need a new hermeneutic of the Gospel and a new theology for the church. We definitely need a new vision for the theology of the city. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) is a paradigm for urban ministry and Gary Riebe-Estrella, Dean at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, looking to the changing situation of multicultural ministry in the city, observes in this passage the importance of entering into one’s neighbor’s world.

“In the parable all three characters, the Levite, the Priest and the Samaritan, notice the person who has been robbed, beaten, and left lying on the side of the road. But it is only the Samaritan who ‘approaches’ that person. It is only the Samaritan who leaves his own preoccupations and enters the world of the other. And he enters not just any other’s world, but that of the one who have been marginalized, left on the side of the road. His motivation is not pity, but ‘compassion’-a ‘feeling with,’ a ‘suffering with’ the other.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

The message behind this story of a marginalized-foreign Samaritan who becomes neighbor to the marginalized-beaten Jew, is an invitation to the church to renew her identity, goals, theology, and praxis at the margins. The church is called to become an inclusive, safe and healing place. This is not made only by moving geographically into the neighborhood. The starting and transformative reality comes only from com-passion, from the Samaritan’s “feeling with” that moves to action.[[33]](#footnote-33)

**3.1 PLURALISM OF MODELS OF PRESENCE AND ACTION**

What I intend to propose now is an inclusive and pluralistic presence and action for this reality of the city by two structures which could complement each other if there is a common missionary/pastoral vision: the parish and the inserted community.

For a relevant and effective ministry in the cities and especially with slum-dwellers and ghetto-dwellers, there is the need to have a maximum of collaboration and vision among the pastoral agents. This means that the religious communities (laity, sisters, brothers, priests, etc.) put all their gifts and skills at the disposal of the missionary/pastoral plan. Some would have their placement and work in the parish and others could choose to live in inserted communities within the ghetto or slum. They would work as one missionary/ pastoral team, as one community and with a common cause. The agents need to come together at least once a week for pastoral and spiritual sharing. Each group needs the other for organization, to be closer to the people and to be open and relevant to their human and spiritual needs.[[34]](#footnote-34)

1. ***THE PARISH: in need of a missionary spirit***

The parish is a territorial concept of rural origin. It has many limitations when applied to the situation of the city. There is no reason at all why urban parishioners should attend their designated parish church or mass center.[[35]](#footnote-35) As I said, historically, parishes were created to take care of the people outside of the cities, then they became institutionalized as the way the church serves God’s people. Also, in ministering to people we cannot be confined by the borders of the parish. People in the ghettoes or in slum areas do not have canonical boundaries. Urban parishes may contain vast industrial areas with a daily influx of hundreds of thousands of workers. While pastoral work in these parishes may be conducted among a small minority of residents affiliated to the parish by domicile, the work sector may be hardly influenced by the church at all.

“The Achilles’ heel of this approach is the perception that the church knows what is best for the neighborhood. Those Christians look at that neighborhood and say, ‘look at these poor people here; what these people need is a youth program for their teenagers to get them out of the streets.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

The church, at this particular time, feels the overwhelming stress of old age and finds it difficult to begin a process of renewal. It no longer answers to the real needs of the people. It has been accused of centralization and too much sacramentalization for its pastoral and this seems to be true. It needs a new vision and a renewed missionary spirit.

I feel that it is necessary to look forward and to experiment with new ways to re-adapt structures which can be of service for the pastoral agents who cannot physically live in the ghettoes or slum areas or commit themselves to special ministries.

The concept of the urban parish as a legalistic ideal of static territory contains limitations that are accentuated in urban settings. I agree with Fr. Shorter who suggests that:

“The parish should be regarded as an event...it is a happening or experience that draws people to it, as a source of stability, integration and prayer...it is a ‘house of the church’ which beckons to people and welcomes them...it is not only a place where the Gospel is celebrated in worship, but a place where Christians help the church fulfill its entire urban mission... It needs to have a physical existence... and facilities for the community: a hall, a set of rooms, a community center, a multi-purpose building...a place where relationships are created, resource persons trained and services offered...a source of reflection, prayer, spiritual growth, stimulation and renewal...but the parish is not merely a magnet that draws people to it...but it propels people outwards to other environments in the city, to their work environments...and to their various Small Christian Communities and neighborhood...its action is simultaneously centripetal and centrifugal and penetrating and elusive.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

***B) THE INSERTED COMMUNITY: a prophetic presence***

In a recent document of the church I have found, at last, an interesting and encouraging comment on the “insertion into poor neighborhoods”. The document quotes:

“In recent years, poverty has been an issue which has involved religious very intensely and which has touched their hearts...how to evangelize the poor. But religious have also wanted to be evangelized through their contact, with the world of the poor...In face of the impoverishment of great masses of people, especially in abandoned and marginal areas of large cities and in forgotten rural areas, ‘religious communities of insertion’ have arisen as one of the expressions of the preferential and solidary evangelical option for the poor.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

These communities intend to accompany the poor in their process of integral liberation, but are also fruits of the desire to discover the poor Christ in marginalized brothers and sisters, in order to serve him and become conformed to him. This presence is a true incarnation in a reality of poverty, violence and marginalization which also means sharing in the uncertainty of the daily life. It is important to become poor with the poor to participate in the empowerment of the people. A ministry that uses power and authority does not make any sense in the ghettoes or in slum areas.

The document, then, continues:

“...insertion is a reality which cannot but arouse admiration for the tremendous personal dedication and great sacrifices which it involves.; for the love of the poor which carries one to share their real and harsh life and poverty; for the effort to make the Gospel present in sectors of population which are without hope; to make them feel a living part of the church...”[[39]](#footnote-39)

These communities often live in areas deeply marked by a violence which gives rise to insecurity and sometimes leads to persecution and even endangers life. Their great courage is clear testimony to the hope that it is possible to live as brothers and sisters, despite all situations of suffering and injustice. There is also, in the document, a strong invitation and encouragement for implementation of this way of being religious and missionary:

“...superiors shall be careful to select suitable members and to prepare such communities in a way that will ensure connection with other communities of the institute, thereby guaranteeing continuity...”[[40]](#footnote-40)

This kind of experience should not be seen as exceptional but within the Charism of a given congregation and should be encouraged to everybody who feels this particular invitation of the Holy Spirit. The superiors have to allow these kinds of experiences with motivated personnel both in the inserted community and in the parish for a good number of years before evaluating the results of such experiments. Often these people are changed and are destined to other commitments “for circumstances beyond one’s control” even before the possibility of an evaluation. If we have to experiment and open new roads of ministry in urban settings, we need also seriousness and continuity from bishops, superiors of religious congregations, provincials etc., in allowing and supporting such projects![[41]](#footnote-41)

Within the context of the urban ministry and parish area, the community of insertion has a great advantage of being physically, psychologically and spiritually present among the poor and the marginalized and it can give a lot of new insights for the implementation of the missionary/pastoral planning of the parish as whole.[[42]](#footnote-42) When insertion among the poor has become, for both the poor and the religious community itself, a true experience of God, the poor are evangelized and the poor evangelize. The ministers need an authentic spirituality of incarnation and this is always arising out of a genuine encounter between God’s Word and God’s World. An authentic process of incarnation with the people requires a *Kenosis* (emptying of oneself) through learning how to wait to listen, to forgive, and to persevere. If this experience of life is done in a spirit of openness, the mission completely changes the horizon of life, the spirituality and humanity of the pastoral agent.

A community inserted in such situations of periphery cannot claim the same experience of the people. There are differences that we cannot deny, like our nationality, race, sex, education, story, etc. We cannot totally become like them, but we can radically stay with them. When we share their lives, sufferings and powerlessness, we learn from them a new lifestyle characterized by distance from the centers of power, but nearness to solidarity among broken people. Therefore, the new lifestyle is a mixture of shared difficulties and hopes for the simplicity and solidarity of the people at the margins.[[43]](#footnote-43)

The reality of an effective inserted community comes from a preferential option for the impoverished, the marginalized, the excluded and the oppressed. Marcello Azevedo sees insertion as transformative and prophetic for the church and society because of its option for the poor.

“I believe that insertion-as disposition and attitude, practice and experience-is one of the major fruits of the option for the poor. It can also be one of its best expressions, wherever there exists a heart for the poor among the poor. It should be said that insertion-geographical, contextual, sympathetic, and apostolic-is not only an expression of evangelical concern. It is also the starting point for many forms of inspiration in regard to structuring the church’s presence in the world today. Insertion among the poor is an inspiring paradigm that stimulates other spiritual and symbolic forms of insertion, such as ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, the presence of the church in the world, and a model for the church’s action in secular, professional, cultural and political context.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

**4. JUSTICE, PEACE, INTEGRITY OF CREATION, DEVELOPMENT, LIBERATION AND THE ROLE OF LAY PEOPLE**

One of the challenges before the Church-Community in the cities is the promotion of peace, justice, development and liberation.

The role of the promotion of justice in evangelization does not need defended today. If the proclamation of justice and peace is an integral part of the task of evangelization, it follows that the promotion of these values should also be part of the pastoral program of each Christian community.

During his visit to Africa in 1995, John Paul II issued “*The Church in Africa*”. He urged all pastoral agents to be adequately trained for this apostolate:

“The formation of clergy, religious and laity, imparted in the areas of their apostolate, should lay emphasis on the social teaching of the church. Each person, according to his state of life, should be specially trained to know his rights and duties, the meaning and service of the common good, honest management of public goods and the proper manner of participating in political life, in order to be able to act in a credible manner in the face of social justice.”[[45]](#footnote-45)

Before that, Paul VI declared with *Evangelii Nuntiandi* that:

“There are close links between evangelization and human advancement, that is, development and liberation”[[46]](#footnote-46)

Again Pope John Paul II in *Sollecitudo Rei Socialis* 41, affirms that in promoting the various aspects of authentic development, the church fulfills its mission to evangelize. And in the Apostolic Exhortation, already quoted, “*The* *Church in Africa*” he also confirmed the importance of the laity of the continent as a “sine qua non conditio” for the implementations of the requirements of the faith:

“The laity are to be helped to become increasingly aware of their role in the church...they are to be trained for their mission through suitable centers and schools of biblical and pastoral formation...Christians who occupy positions of responsibility are to be carefully prepared for political, economic and social tasks by means of a solid formation in the church’s social doctrine, so that in their places of work they will be faithful witnesses to the Gospel.”[[47]](#footnote-47)

The call to faith today is a call to justice, because the vision of a new humanity of freedom, fellowship and justice is confronted with an actual world and city where there is poverty, oppression, “unfreedom,” inequality, injustice, violence and hatred.

Christian life must be a life of service. If we are to take Christ’s teachings seriously, we have to recognize that all aspects of human life present us with opportunities for Christian service. These include the promotion of justice, peace and politics. Vatican II described the gap between faith and daily life as one of the most serious errors of our time.[[48]](#footnote-48) Paul VI in a section headed “Call to Action”, wrote:

“It is not enough to recall principles, state intentions, point to crying injustices and utter prophetic denunciations; these words will lack real weight unless they are accompanied for each individual by a livelier awareness of personal responsibility and effective action. It is all too easy to throw back on others responsibility for injustice.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

Despite such guidance, the gap between faith and daily life persists. The call for the church to “stay out of politics” can be heard from many sides. This is a challenge for the Christian vocation of the laity on all the continents and especially in the cities; they have a great role to play in it. Politics is a noble vocation for lay people and an opportunity for service which means more than party struggle. It embraces concern for the common good.

“The development of basic ecclesial communities within the church structures attributes new or additional functions to the hierarchy and helps to renew and reorientate the church’s organization.”[[50]](#footnote-50)

The clergy also have a right and duty to speak out on issues directly affecting the church or to defend fundamental values and the common good. Hence, it is of fundamental importance for laity and clergy to form themselves and to form others about their own precise role in the promotion of justice and human development. The church has to be involved in the realities of the world in order to bear witness to the values of the Gospel. And the Christians Communities are called to be conscious about justice and peace issues because:

“...it is up to the Christian Communities to analyze with objectivity the situation...to shed on it the light of the Gospel’s unalterable words and to draw principles of reflection, norms of judgment and directives for action from the social teaching of the church...”[[51]](#footnote-51)

The creation of justice and peace groups active and relevant at parish, deanery, diocesan and national level are an urgent imperative!

The city needs laity, Christian Communities, and professional people prepared to face the realities of injustices and ready to enter into the arena of politics, and the social and economic spheres with true Christian principles.

**5. SEARCHING FOR SPIRITUALITY IN THE CITY**

The given facts, figures and projections should be a direct challenge to the mission and spirituality of the church in the world. Even the church documents I have quoted constitute a stimulus and challenge to all of us to rise and face such reality with an attitude of searching.

If mission means announcing Jesus Christ’s Good News of salvation to the poor, the poorest of the poor are today living in the ghettoes and slums of the great cities all over the world. Then, the disciples of Jesus should be there to:

“Bring the Good News to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, sight to the blind, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord’s year of favor”[[52]](#footnote-52)

If mission means revealing that God is the God of the poor, the oppressed, the outcasts and the prisoners, then one of the places for carrying out that mission is in the ghettoes and slum areas.

But which spirituality is required from the people who accepts this challenge? We need to cultivate a new spirituality for our lives and our cities: a spirituality of the kingdom present everywhere and in everybody. This will be a spirituality of resistance to any authority or authorities which undermine the authority of God’s reign in us, among us or anywhere in the world. If we allow the Spirit to lead us, we can do what we are supposed to do as Christians. This spirituality demands that we contemplate with faith and hope the kingdom of God within us and around us, as well as its growth in the liberation of all. Bring Good News to the people tired of experiencing bad news, offer hope to people who see all doors closed, encourage the struggle of people who are weary, and praise God joyfully.

To be able to incarnate this spirituality of presence[[53]](#footnote-53) we need to share a life of faith which involves the kind of trust and loyalty, passion and commitment that we develop in God, as we go among the poor and marginalized peoples of the cities. We also need to develop in each other and in ourselves the courage to risk being different.

This incarnated spirituality is open to the world in its historical, social, political and economic dimensions; it is a spirituality that makes us able to discover and become increasingly aware of the presence of Christ in the world, in events, and in the poor. In this context, the incarnational and contemplative dimension of religious life should find expression together. This is also a spirituality which creates new paths for reconciliation among communities, broken people, and in the city and slums where tensions, oppression and violence are everyday bread. But this reconciliation is not a substitute for liberation. There is no reconciliation if there is still injustice, abuse, violence and oppression.[[54]](#footnote-54) Seeking reconciliation without a serious commitment to justice and liberation is not sufficient since it is only in removing the barriers that divide people (cultural, social and material) that reconciliation can realistically take place between the former oppressed and the former oppressor.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Nevertheless, this spirituality has to be ecumenical, and thus open to developing our understanding that the passion for unity is fundamental to the service of mission in the city: unity in witness and witness in unity. This is an openness to the spiritual enrichment of the diversity of other Christian denominations and even other religions present in the cities. Actually, religious pluralism presents an ethical challenge to build bridges starting from those alienated and marginalized groups, for the sake of creating more harmony and less conflict in the city and on the planet.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Most of all this is a spirituality of the “kingdom of God” which is revealed in *presence*, in *participative community*, in *certain values*, in *human struggle* and in *historical processes*. The option of “going to live among them” requires discernment and decision but also commitment because we need reflection, prayer and sharing to better understand the continuous evolution of our vocation and the way we carry out our Christian mission to the city. Thus inserted community becomes a way of life, not just an established task to be performed and completed. It is the way of the poor’s life that transforms our own life as Christians and Consecrated people.

“In the last ten years the effective presence of communities in situations of poverty and the involvement of communities in places of misery and marginalization have been the sign of a consecrated life which fully embraces not only poverty but the very life of the poor, their risks, their trials and their problems.”[[57]](#footnote-57)

-When we talk about the presence of God’s kingdom in the world, we can say that it is found in certain places and situations more clearly than in others. We can find its expression in creation itself, the place of God’s dwelling and, therefore, God’s kingdom. But, we find it also in the variety and diversity of cultures, revealing God’s presence in and among unique groups of people, especially the poor, joining with them in their efforts and struggles to reorder the wealth of the rich of our day. Moreover, the experience of several religious communities who live inserted in contexts of poverty and marginality challenge the traditional understanding of spirituality.[[58]](#footnote-58) They experience a new spirituality rooted in a God who lives, walks and struggles among the poorest and most abandoned people in the city. It is not simply a variant to what we normally consider spirituality, but a revolution.[[59]](#footnote-59) Today’s cities and slums demand a new and more incarnated spirituality, methodology and lifestyle. A new vision for urban mission is urgently needed and the experience of inserted communities represent a hope and a paradigm for the ministry of the church around the world.[[60]](#footnote-60)

-While talking about participative community, we discover that the kingdom of God is found in our midst when Jesus’ vision “that all may be one”[[61]](#footnote-61) is realized. This occurs in systems and structures that promote participation. This participation becomes actuated when the dignity of all people is realized in freedom, when all can share the resources and achieve equity, and when relationships of mutuality and solidarity occur.

-Again, the kingdom of God is found in certain values which Jesus preached by his words and proclaimed by his life: truth and freedom, reconciliation and justice, compassion and care, love and community.

-The kingdom of God is found among us in human struggles as well, specifically when these are geared to human liberation and solidarity among peoples. These struggles will promote solidarity in positive ways through traditional forms of conscientization as well as new tools for social analysis. Solidarity will also be promoted by communitarian movements which invite greater collaboration and collective responses and through strategies geared to find weak points in the dominant system.[[62]](#footnote-62)

-Finally, the kingdom of God is found in any processes that promote these values by participative communities’ presence among the marginalized.[[63]](#footnote-63)

As ministers in urban contexts, we should be committed to a spirituality of littleness, composed of daily actions of significance which make a concrete difference by small communities who live among and with the poor. These small faith communities will sustain our faith as we seek to support each other in the challenges facing us. They will be characterized by certain attitudes and forms of reflection, signified by the ways we search the Scripture to know how we should walk with God. Searching the wisdom of the people, especially the poor, to balance our own insights is another important attitude. In these small communities, resources and energies will be reserved to search for the signs of the times so that we might be converted. Finally, it will be fundamental to search for the truth so that we may speak truth to those in power and be voice for the voiceless.[[64]](#footnote-64)

In the process of incarnation and immersion in the reality of the big cities, the aspirations of city-dwellers must become the aspirations of the pastoral agents and for this reason optimism is very important in city apostolate. No one can effectively evangelize cities when one has a pessimistic view of such life and disregards the city as a hopeless place.

**CONCLUSION: LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE WITH HOPE**

Very often Christians forget their commitment to build a just and peaceful world and city. In times of distress they tend to put all their hopes in the afterlife. But mission done “in a time of distress” requires a new paradigm, in which activities are secondary while presence and communion with the people are the primary tasks.

A new era of evangelization is open. In order to be a presence that inspires hope and promotes a new future, the church needs to take into account the present while dreaming and struggling for a better future. A true missionary church has to be open and ready to be a presence in this new urban world in gestation which is about to see the light.

“...It is true that the option for the neediest means that we should not overlook the most abandoned and isolated human groups, but it is also true that individuals or small groups cannot be evangelized if we neglect the centers where a new humanity... is emerging, and where new models of development are taking shape. The future of the younger nations is shaped in the cities...”[[65]](#footnote-65)

We are called to join the vast numbers of anonymous men and women who in the midst of poverty, distress and despair, economic crisis and ecological disasters of our cities, contribute with their work, words and presence to bring forth a new era of justice and peace. It is rewarding to know that among them there are many Christians who are holding onto their faith by sharing the suffering and the living conditions of their brothers and sisters. They are the ones who through their solidarity, lifestyle and presence, make God’s Word relevant to the poorest and most abandoned people of the cities.

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