THE JOY OF THE Gospel IN CHAD

Sharing THE JOY OF THE Gospel IN CHAD

Also in this issue...

Ministering in the midst of Ebola
Nine years of ministry in South Sudan
Family Life, Synod of Bishops
A reflection on earth of divine bliss
A peaceful, God-loving family is;
God's smile on them always shines
He shields them from all evil tines.

Where man and wife both know their roles
And carry them out as God extols;
Offsprings obedient - what a beautiful thing -
Who flow with parents through thick and thin.

How lush and green is the home of such,
With joy they share whether few or much;
They shine so bright in the darkest night
The Love of God must be their might.

By Father George Okoro, MSP
Liberia Mission
Editor's Note

Building the Family as a Domestic Church

Look around you! The weather has changed, the cold season is giving way to a warmer season, springtime is here and new life is blooming again! The dryness and desert nature of lent is giving way to the greenness of new life and blooming lilies of Easter. The Lord of heaven and earth, Jesus Christ who suffered and died for us is risen from the dead. We are filled with renewed vigor and hope for a better future. In this edition, we focus on the family as a domestic church and the challenges facing families and re-evaluate our commitment to inculcating moral values on our children.

According to the Second Vatican Council, “The family is so to speak, the domestic church” (Lumen Gentium #11). This means that it is in the context of the family that we first learn who God is and we prayerfully seek His will for us. The Church is not oblivious of the challenges and crisis besetting families in our contemporary society, that is why Pope Francis called for an Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the family to address issues of increase in divorce, remarried Catholics being allowed to receive the sacraments, couples co-habiting without marriage, homosexual/gay unions seeking to be recognised by the Church etc. During the extraordinary synod in October 2014, Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama, the President of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria made a landmark intervention when he emphasized the sacredness of marriage and of life - and powerfully opposed the agenda of the population control lobbyist. These issues of urgent attention are discussed in a very inspiring and insightful way in this edition for your faith renewal.

Scripture often speaks about the conversion of entire households (e.g., Acts 11:14, 16:15, 18:8). Family homes like little islands of Christian life, became the first centers of worship for the growing Church. The Catechism of the Catholic Church points out, “in our own time, in a world often alien and even hostile to faith, believing families are of primary importance as centers of living, radiant faith” (1656). So too the Missionary Society of St Paul in transmitting the Gospel has reached out to families afflicted by war, famine, poverty, lack of health care and unemployment in remote villages of Africa as evident in the testimonies shared in this edition by Frs. Mark Ameh, JohnPaul Arowosoge and Bonaventure Iyogun in Chad, Liberia and South Sudan respectively.

Pope Francis has declared this year as Year of Consecrated Life. In this edition we highlighted the life of Rev. Sr. (Dr) Léonie McSweeney, MMM, MB, MFR who has been an apostle of love and life as she celebrates her Diamond Jubilee in the religious life. She has a featured column “Family Information Service” series for our Nigerian audience. We pray for her good health of mind and body and more fulfilled years as she continues her remarkable contribution in encouraging Natural Family Planning through the Billings method in Nigeria.

Our dear esteemed reader, as we celebrate Easter, remember that Christ suffered, died, and rose again for us so that we may share his life with others. As each season brings its own joys and challenges, setbacks and victories, we must strive to bear witness to the Gospel and grow as a domestic church in our families. May the risen Christ be the light that enlightens your mind and your families!

Editor
Fr Dan Ifiok Udofia, MSP

Cover
Fr. Mark Ameh
dancing in thanksgiving to God in Chad

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The Catholic Ambassador is a mission magazine published quarterly with the permission of the Ordinary of Ijebu-Ode Diocese, by THE MISSIONARY SOCIETY OF ST. PAUL OF NIGERIA
It appears in the United States three times a year.

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Graphic Design
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Dancing in thanksgiving to God in Chad
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On October 5th 2014 Pope Francis called for extraordinary synod on the Family. The aim of this extraordinary synod was to address the issues facing the family in the modern time and prepare for the ordinary synod that will take place in October 2015. Yes, there is an increase in divorce, an increase in civil union while religious marriage is on the decline and there are couples co-habiting without marriage. There is also the issue of homosexuals and their unions asking to be accepted in the Church. They would like the Church to recognize their union; to baptize their children, to allow them to the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Communion. The issue of divorced but remarried Catholics being allowed to receive the sacraments is equally attracting attention and discussion. These are the issues concerning the family which need urgent attention.

There is no institution in the world more fundamental, more foundational, more sacred and basic to human society than the family. The family is initiated through the coming together of husband and wife with the view that children will eventually be born. The family is like a domestic church, and when we say the family is a domestic church what do we mean? The word “domestic” comes from Latin ‘domus’ meaning ‘home’. So, when we say the family is a domestic church, it means it is a home church. It is a small church where the father, the mother and the children form a small ecclesial community where faith is propagated and love is made manifest. Whatever values we have in the society ought to be instilled in the children within the family setting. The family has been the cornerstone of the transmission of life and the basis of personal identity as well as moral and cultural values.

As noted above, there are aberrations coming into the family setting as if it were the norm. The Pope once said that if God welcomes a homosexual, who is he to condemn a homosexual person? By this, the Pope indicates that God does not condemn anybody. So, we are not talking about individuals or persons. Homosexuals should not be condemned since God does not condemn anyone. But the practice of homosexuality or lesbianism do not promote the fundamental family values embedded in nature. These practices are aberrations. In fact, according to Benedict XVI, the practice of homosexuality is intrinsically evil. The Nigerian government has gone as far as placing a ban on it. It is a way of saying “Look, we don’t want this. It is against our African cultural values.”

On the issue of divorced and re-married people receiving sacraments I strongly believe the coming synod will discuss this. What is the place of the divorced and re-married? Should the Church continue to deny them sacraments? Pope Francis in his recent Apostolic Exhortation no. 47, makes it clear that the Holy Communion is not the prize for the perfect, but powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak. So, if we have this concept, should we continue to deny sacraments to these people? I believe the coming synod will take a critical look at the issue and search for a way forward. In November 2014 I attended the conference of Union of Superior Generals (USG) in Rome. During our discussion, one Italian priest said: “We are discussing that divorced but remarried Catholics should not be allowed to Communion. How many people in our various communities are divorced from one another and they not only receive communion but they go on celebrating the Eucharist?” This was very striking for me. It seems to me that while the Church will continue to teach the unity of marriage and discourage divorce, she will need to find a pastoral way to reach out to divorced and remarried Catholics in order to allow them to receive the Sacraments. We wait and see what will be the outcome of the forthcoming synod on the family October 2015.

Even though there may be aberrations, there are a good number of families that are making honest efforts to live out the family vocation, the family values. The synod must foster and encourage such families to continue along this line.
Edward Pemida aptly captured the sentiments of the eight young men to be ordained when he said, “We are a product of divine faithfulness. We have had our own dosage of life’s huddles and glories, and yet, we come to testify by our very lives that great is His faithfulness!” This sentiment was obvious as they proceeded with smiles on their faces, on Saturday, December 13, 2014, into the chapel of the National Missionary Seminary of St Paul, Gwagwalada-Abuja for their diaconate ordination. By their ordination to the transitional deaconate, they made an irrevocable commitment to celibacy, obedience and simplicity of life (poverty) in the service of God and humanity.

The ordaining prelate, Most Revd. Camilllus R. Umoh, bishop of Ikot Ekpene diocese, Akwa Ibom State highlighted the scriptural and theological significance of the office of deacons. He emphasized that the diaconate is an office of honor and service to the Church, which flows from the mission of Christ to the Apostles: “As the Father has sent me, so am I sending you...” (John 20: 21). He went on to say, “Your ministry must be ordered, definitive and modelled according to the image of Christ and the authority of the Church for its effectiveness. Today, there are so many ministries propagated by priests, for the sake of fame and materialism. Consider carefully who your models are and the value of what you are about to undertake. And never forget the poor, the aged and the lonely”.

Those ordained transitional deacons were: Revds. Cyprian Arinze IJEZIE, Anthony Obinna ODOEMELAM, Edward Onimisi PEMIDA, Valentine Nnamdi EGBUONU, Kelvin UGWU, Charles Ijeoma EGBON, Vincent Joseph UBOM and Godwin Anayochukwu AGUDIEGWU. They ask for your prayers as they continue their priestly formation and look forward to their ordination as priest in June 2015.
The Priestly Silver Jubilee Anniversary celebration of priest members of the Missionary Society of St Paul of Nigeria (MSP) has become an annual event. This year’s celebration was not different though it was moved from June to a more suitable time in October for convenience. It was a beautiful and colorful Saturday, October 18, 2014 as the 1989 ordination class processed to the altar in joyful praise and thanksgiving to God for twenty-five years of fruitful service in the Lord’s vineyard just the way they did twenty-five years ago on their priestly ordination on July 1, 1989. The joyful celebrants were Reverend Fathers Augustine Ogar, Anthony Ekanem, Edward Obi, Joseph Amuzie, Noel Effiong, Michael Faneye, Cosmas Nwosuh, Eliseus Ibeh, Bernard Ngwu and Paschal Nwachukwu.

With numerous priests, religious and laity in attendance at the chapel of the National Missionary Seminary of St Paul, Gwagwalada, Abuja, one of the jubilarians and Vicar General of the Missionary Society of St. Paul, Very Revd Fr Augustine Ogar, MSP presided over the Holy Mass. Before the Mass began, the Superior General, Very Revd Fr Victor Onwukeme, MSP in his welcome speech, thanked all gathered who had travelled far and wide to join in the celebration. He congratulated the celebrants praising their perseverance using the words of Jesus saying, “You are men who have stood faithfully by me in my time of trials” (Luke 22:28). He added: “Yes, you have stood firm in your promise to follow Christ through celibate missionary priesthood in the Missionary Society of St Paul. We salute you and rejoice with you”.

The homilist of the day Fr John Joyce, SPS who moderated the retreat of the Jubilarians and was one of their Formators during their Seminary training admonished them saying, Jubilee is a time of celebration and also a time of salvation. He reminded the celebrants that they must acknowledge that they are ministers of mercy in a world filled with injustice. More so they should serve the Lord in joy and happiness no matter the circumstances of life.

The Superior General presented the jubilarians with plaques of appreciation and Papal blessings for their fruitful missionary service to the Missionary Society of St. Paul and the Church amidst the thunderous cheers from the congregation. Finally Fr Cosmas Nwosuh, MSP on behalf of the Jubilarians, expressed their gratitude to all. The Mass came to an end at about 2pm with a procession that terminated at the statue of St Paul for a group photograph.
“The Gospel offers us the chance to live life on a higher plane, but with no less intensity: life grows by being given away, and it weakens in isolation and comfort. Indeed, those who enjoy life most are those who leave security on the shore and become excited by the mission of communicating life to others” (Evangelium Gaudium No. 10).

A NATION RAVAGED BY WAR

Southern Sudan has been ravaged by war for over 50 years. In 2011, after so many years of marginalization, the nation was separated from Sudan and became an Independent nation called South Sudan. Though this was a consequence of a prolonged war, crisis and destruction it has paved the way for a relative peace and reconstruction. The peace is relative because since independence on July 9, 2011, the whole issue of power sharing among the freedom fighters has kept everyone on edge. There have been pockets of fighting among various tribes in different states. Thus the youngest nation in the world is now bedeviled by civil war.

MSP IS ENTRUSTED WITH A NEW PARISH ON MISSION SUNDAY

The mission of the Missionary Society of St. Paul in South Sudan is one that demands a high level of patience and dedication. This is so because of its unique and peculiar nature. Our mission in South Sudan is basically primary evangelization and it is challenging, to say the least, ministering to God’s people who are hungry for God and crying for peace. We began the mission in 2005, collaborating with the St Patrick Society in the diocese of Torit, Eastern Equatorial State. After nine years of fruitful service to the people of God and in acknowledgement of the selfless sacrifices and commitment of the MSP, on October 19, 2014, being Mission Sunday, the Apostolic Administrator of the diocese of Torit, Rt. Rev. Monsignor Thomas Oliyah, AJ canonically installed Rev. Fr. Noel C. Ugoagwu, MSP as the Parish Priest of Our Lady of Assumption Parish, Torit town. Rev. Frs. Kizito Anyanwu, MSP and Bonaventure Iyogun, MSP were also appointed as parochial vicars to work with him in the parish. Rev. Fr. Noel C. Ugoagwu, MSP has been working in this diocese for over 2 years as the Mission Bursar until October, 2014 when he was appointed the Mission Superior. While Rev. Frs. Kizito Anyanwu and Bonaventure Iyogun arrived South Sudan on September 18, 2014 to joined the MSP community in the diocese of Torit.

AN EBOLA OUTBREAK COULDN’T DETER OUR JOURNEY

Due to the outbreak of the Ebola Virus in West Africa, the South Sudanese authorities were slow in allowing people from West African countries from coming into their country. But the love for God’s people and His mission made these brothers travel through land, passing through Lockichoggio, the Kenyan town bordering South Sudan. Rev. Fr. Chris Unachukwu, MSP, the immediate past mission superior, made arrangements for our ground transportation from the Jomo Kenyatta
International Airport, Nairobi Kenya to Torit. The journey from Lockichoggio, Kenya to Torit, South Sudan took about 10 hours of driving on the untarred and dangerous Trans-East African high-way. When we arrived the entrance of Torit town after a tough desert drive with our hearts in our mouths all the while, some armed young men stopped us. They looked more like vigilante group, but they claimed to be police officers. They inquired about our movement, and we told them we were Abuna (meaning priests in the local language). They insisted on checking all our belongings one after the other, and rough handling the priestly vestments and other items therein. They asked us to bring the guns we had with us. We told them we had none, but this did not satisfy them. It was already dark at this time and we were now afraid that we were going to be robbed and maltreated. Our saving grace was Fr. Chris who had served there for some years. He called some officials and identified us over the phone. We were allowed to proceed to the city but not without asking for some money. Since our immigration documents were complete and up to date, we did not yield to their intimidation. This experience gave us a negative impression about our new environment. However, the leader of the bad officers was apprehended and punished next day for his illegalities while his boss apologized to us for the embarrassment. With this some appreciable level of confidence was restored to us and our security assured.

Prior to our appointment to this Torit town Parish, we were helping out with Masses on Sundays at Katire, an out-station recently made a quasi-parish. We would stop at Imilai, one of its outstations, for Mass before heading for Katire Church, a journey of 3 hours. This journey, which usually began at 7am, took us till 5pm. The new parish assigned to us has four basic Christian communities and has over nine big out-stations that could have been made parishes but for shortage of pastoral agents and financial difficulties. Masses are celebrated every day of the week; twice daily and three Masses on Sundays in Lotuko, English and Arabic at the main parish church.

LOOKING FORWARD IN HOPE OF HAVING MORE MISSIONARIES HERE

It was a day of great joy on the occasion of the installation of Rev. Fr. Noel C. Ugoagwu, MSP (Mission Superior) as parish priest, and Rev. Fr. Kizito Anyanwu, MSP and Rev. Fr. Bonaventure Iyogun, MSP (the new Mission Bursar) to assist him. The parishioners of Our Lady of Assumption Parish and indeed the local church in Torit, trooped out in great numbers and accompanied their new priests in a procession from the priests’ residence to the church, rejoicing and dancing to the glory of God because for them, a new dawn had come. It was evident that the Missionary Society of St Paul was well appreciated for her work and commitment in South Sudan over the past nine years. In fact the people look forward to having more missionaries from Nigeria, the Missionary Society of St Paul precisely. We trust in God’s word: "Be not afraid...the battle is not yours but God's" 2 Chronicles 20:15.
After my priestly ordination in June 2006 into the Missionary Society of St Paul and my first pastoral assignment in Nigeria, I began my first missionary assignment in a foreign country, the Republic of Chad in November, 2007. Initially when my name came up for mission to Chad I was a bit scared as a young missionary priest, because of all the challenging and tough stories I had heard about Chad during my Seminary training. Some of our brothers who came back from that mission had lots of funny, challenging and at times frightening stories to tell.

On arrival in Maiduguri, a City in Northern Nigeria, we boarded a taxi and went further north. The journey went on for hours. It was as if we were making a pilgrimage from the North to the South Pole. For a few days we traversed many abandoned arid lands and bad roads garnished with pot holes and cracks. On this long and most eventful journey we were stopped by many customs and security officers at their posts at some of the border towns in the far north of Nigeria. In many cases their looks were very mean, angry and unfriendly. Some of them tried to intimidate us by threatening to seize our traveling documents. The journey from Nigeria to Chad by road was one of the most frightening trips I have ever made in my life. It was on this journey that the implication of the choice I made 10 years earlier to become a missionary priest dawned on me. In spite of all these initial set-backs we finally arrived safely with great joy at N’Djamena the capital city of ‘La Republique du Tchad’ as it is called in French.

My first encounter with the people
My missionary work in the Republic
of Chad was a great learning experience. I had a first-hand encounter and knowledge of some of the tribes, cultural practices, and dialects of the people of southern Chad. It was so fascinating to discover some similarities between some of the dialects spoken in the southern part of the country where I worked, and my mother tongue, the Idoma dialect spoken in Benue State, a north central state in Nigeria, West Africa. It really gave me a better appreciation of my home dialect and my people. But there was more to it. I had to learn two different languages, namely, French, (official language) and Sar (the local dialect). I had to begin everything afresh as there was a lot to learn in order to be useful to the people there. I made so many grammatical blunders since it was all new to me. But the people were very understanding.

As I recall my mission experiences in the Republic of Chad doing the Lord’s work, I have great cause to give thanks to Him. Initially it was tough for me trying to speak French and Sar. But I never gave up, I kept learning. Today, I am a happy that I persevere as I can now communicate meaningfully, and celebrate the Holy Eucharist in French and Sar.

The remarkable faith of the people
Chad is a landlocked country. Its economic growth is greatly hampered by a poor transport system, inadequate natural resources, political dictatorship, ignorance, corruption, harsh weather, and a very high mortality rate. More than 80% of her total population depend on subsistence farming and animal husbandry. For instance only a very small fraction of my parishioners had white collar jobs. Most of them were poor peasant farmers and petty traders. The sufficient rainfall within our geographical region encouraged the cultivation of cotton and peanuts and some other subsistent crops like millet, sorghum, rice, potatoes, and manioc. Most families raised cattle, goats, chickens, guinea fowls, pigs, etc. This was how they sustained their families and supported themselves. In spite of all these challenges I encountered a lot of people there with remarkable faith. They kept hoping and believing that things will become better someday. I will continue to treasure their well inculturated Eucharistic celebration. It will simply take your breath away.

The God of mission provides
Indeed the initial challenges I encountered on my arrival in the Republic of Chad and the poor living condition of those I ministered to all my years there were mountains that stared at me in the face. But I knew that the Lord who had sent me there would not abandon me. He was even there before I got there. I knew he would never lead me to where his grace could not sustain me. As one of my mentors would say, “When God sends you on mission he makes provisions.” The challenges were there but I refused to give up on God. I saw some of the challenges as stepping stones to a higher altitude. Yes, ‘tough times don’t last they say, but tough people do.’ I can bear witness to that. I will greatly treasure every moment I spent in Chad. For me those experiences were life transforming as they have helped me to be in touch with the reality of my being. I can say with St Paul “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).
On September 5, 2014 the Missionary Society of St. Paul正式 began a fundraising effort to build a Comprehensive Vocational/Technical College in Gwagwalada municipal area of the Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria. The event took place at the Abuja Sheraton Hotel & Towers. Among those present were the Chief host, the Archbishop of Abuja and Ordinary of the Missionary Society of St. Paul of Nigeria, His Eminence, John Cardinal Onaiyekan; the Superior General of the Missionary Society of St Paul, Very Rev Fr Victor Onwukeme, MSP and His Councilors; Nigerian political figures, captains of industries, other private sector players, priests and religious, including some MSP Bishops.

The Catholic Church in Nigeria has a strong desire to support and strengthen quality education that provides holistic growth of the human person including moral, intellectual, religious, relational, affective and cultural. Cardinal Onaiyekan noted that: “Today education in Nigeria appeared to be at crossroads, as over one hundred tertiary institutions in the country, turn out army of graduates yearly without jobs to do…” He assured all that the Catholic Church will not relent in searching for the Truth in order to share it with others and in particular, “to foster our children’s ethical formation and inner growth so as to build their moral and intellectual stature against any manipulation of their innocence or consciences”.

Cardinal Onaiyekan urged the guests to support the initiative of the Missionary Society of St Paul’s Technical College. He noted that this initiative is geared towards developing and empowering individual’s economic life-skills of our teeming youth who have the extraordinary potential for promoting respect for life and human progress, through self-employment and individuals’ entrepreneurial development towards job creation.

In his address, the Superior-General of the Missionary Society of St. Paul, Very Rev. Fr. (Dr.) Victor Onwukeme, MSP, recalled with historical accuracy the establishment of the Missionary Society of St. Paul. In his address, he stated that the proposed school will promote the education apostolate of MSP and that this keys into the nation’s transformation agenda of the President, His Excellency Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, (GCFR). It will also promote...
above all, moral and ethical values for which the Catholic Church is globally reckoned”. He noted that the school will also provide some financial sustainability for the Society especially as “the Vatican through Propaganda Fide, who has been giving subsidy to facilitate the running of the Seminary, would no longer be able sustain its subsidy due to diminishing sources of income.”

The MSP family is ever grateful to the laudable efforts of the Fund-Raising Planning Committee, Chaired by the Permanent Secretary, MFCT, Engr. John O. Chukwu, FNSE, The Chairman of the Fund-Raising occasion, the Senate President, Sen. (Dr.) David Mark, GCON, represented by his Chief of Staff Sen. (Dr.) Anthony Manzo and many other reputable citizens and friends of the church who donated generously for the realization of this project.

We encourage all men and women of goodwill to donate generously to this divine venture. No amount is too small. We pray that as you join in building up God’s Kingdom here on earth, may He build your homes, families, businesses and future; and give success to the works of our hands. Please kindly help us fulfil this mission of educating our youth.

Donations could be made online at www.mspfathers.org.
Make check payable and mailed to:

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Houston, TX 77230-0145
Experiencing Jesus
a New in Post-War Liberia
by Fr. JohnPaul Kolawole Arowosoge, MSP

A PEOPLE TRAUMATIZED BY WAR
Liberia became better known in the 1990s for its long-running, ruinous civil war, which claimed the lives of over 250,000 people, spanning through a long period of about 14 years, and leading to over 700,000 as refugees to other countries. Liberia is presently on the slow process of recovering from the economic, political, social, psychological and spiritual trauma of the war.

Many lost everything and everyone that was close to them, and even the meaning of life itself. Some live without hope because of the traumatic effect of the war on them. Some have lost the sense of who God is. I remember encouraging a young lady about the need to forgive, for we also seek forgiveness from God, and she asked me the following questions: “Where was God when my parents were killed, when my brother was conscripted as a child soldier, when I was forcefully married off against my will to a wicked and heartless soldier, who raped me twice everyday till his death? Where was God in all these? How could you ask me to forgive him?”

CHURCH: THE REFUGE AND SOLACE OF THE POOR AND HELPLESS
While some have lost the sense of who God is in the war, some others held on to God and His Church. It is very important to acknowledge the fact that the Catholic Church in Liberia played a significant and positive role during this period under the leadership of the late Archbishop Michael K. Francis. The church stood for the right and protection of many people, not minding their tribal, racial or religious affiliations. The Church then was indeed the refuge of the poor and helpless. The Archbishop Michael Francis, was named the "conscience of the nation" by Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the president of Liberia, because of his unflinching support for the fight against injustice and atrocities of all the brutal dictatorial regimes of Charles Taylor and Samuel Doe.

EPIPHANY EXPERIENCE: A TIME OF REAWAKENING AND HOPE
Liberia is now in a time of epiphany, a time of reawakening. There is light at the end of the tunnel. The light sometimes comes out so bleak, but the sight of it makes us say, Liberia will rise again. The celebration of the feast of Epiphany has a new meaning for Liberia. One of the areas where we find our ministry very effective is in the celebration of the sacraments, especially the sacrament of Reconciliation. The sense of sin is not
so strong among the people, for some have lost the years of catechesis. Thus we have a lot of Catholics who know little about the Church. Some joined the Church during the period of war because they found solace there, but never had the opportunity to be well catechized. With that, the appreciation of the Sacraments, especially Penance, is very poor. So I had to engage in continuous catechesis especially during homilies at Mass, since that might be the only time to reach out to majority. The good news is that, the number of people who came to be reconciled to God on a daily basis keeps increased, as I made myself available for the sacraments every day after Mass. There is a ray of hope. I saw it in their eyes and hearts!

THE MEDIA AND COMMUNITY CHOIR AS TOOLS OF EVANGELIZATION

One big gift the Archdiocese of Monrovia has given to the entire nation is the Catholic radio station called ‘Radio Veritas’. It is a big tool of evangelization, as so many people tune to the station to know and strengthen their faith, and also to get credible and unbiased news about situations in the country. I also tapped into the lively religious background of Nigerian residents in Monrovia. I started a Nigerian community choir which has brought together the Nigerian community and became a great tool of evangelization. It has been a very huge success despite the difficulty in gathering men and women, many of whom have never been in the choir before.

MY INTERACTION WITH THE YOUTHS

I was also involved in the teaching apostolate as a way of bringing the light of Christ to the younger generation. I taught the senior high students at the St. Teresa's Catholic High School. This was challenging, as I had to be a teacher, priest, father, friend and brother to these young girls. During my interaction with my students and parishioners, I got to realize that the family institution is facing a lot of challenges that the people are not well equipped to deal with. Some of these challenges include single parents raising kids, grandparents raising grandkids whose parents were killed during the war and also issues of blended families.

WE NEED YOUR URGENT SUPPORT

The celebration of the feast of Epiphany here in Liberia is really a continuous celebration as this is seen and experienced in the everyday life of this post-war country. The people to whom we bring the Gospel message need prayers and financial help. The young girls of this country are in urgent need of encouragement to go to school and have good education. This will help them to avoid teenage pregnancy and early marriage.

The fact that many are so poor that they cannot afford basic education makes their condition very pathetic. We the missionaries working here, with our meager resources have been trying to provide scholarships for some of them. We will love to do more. Thus, this serves as a call to well-spirited individuals to show their Christian charity by helping the MSP mission in Liberia in this endeavor.

Fr. JohnPaul Arowosoge is now a graduate student in Rome. MSP still has two priests ministering in Liberia.
Fr George shares his personal and shocking experience as he comes face to face with Ebola virus disease victims who are dying in anguish and pain in Liberia.

Nigerian missionaries working in Liberia are now ‘Ebola suspects’ when they travel even to their own country since the Liberian Patrick Sawyer ‘imported’ Ebola into Nigeria. Many a Nigerian has come to believe that everybody in Liberia is a carrier of Ebola virus disease. When I entered Nigeria from Liberia on August 15, 2014, everybody viewed me as a disaster waiting to happen. On telling people where I came from, many took three steps backwards, some ran away outright. I remember visiting a priest in his office two days later and he almost jumped out through the third floor window of his office. I feigned oblivious of his action, went over – as a good priest-brother – and gave him a big hug. If eyes were guns I would have dropped dead at that moment. I was not alone in this funny experience: a priest also working in Liberia narrated how, as soon as he was introduced in the Church as a missionary priest working in Liberia those sitting in the front pews relocated to the back.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT EBOLA?
A lot has been said about the recent outbreak of Ebola virus in West Africa to the point that many people are now experts on the subject. Thus, one does not need to give a lecture about the Ebola Virus Disease in this body of work. Some facts of this virus/disease are 1) Ebola virus was named after the Ebola River in the Democratic Republic of Congo where the first outbreak in Africa was recorded in 1976; 2) it is characterized by massive bleeding and destruction of internal tissues, is highly contagious, and can be contracted through contact with infected bodily fluids; 3) that the disease has a high fatality rate; 4) it grabs and kills a person in just twenty one days (if not cured within that period).

WHY THE EBOLA OUTBREAK SPREAD LIKE WILDFIRE
As soon as the news broke in February 2014 that there was an outbreak of Ebola virus in Guinea, everybody in Liberia became apprehensive because they knew it was a disaster that would surely come. Based on the geographical locations, proximities and relationships between Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, one would understand that anything that happens to one of these countries would likely spill over to the others. You cannot completely seal off the borders between these three countries because the farmers and hunters know the entry points better than the most seasoned border patrol corps. The reason is because people from these three countries are basically one people, separated during the Scramble for Africa by the western colonial masters. In imposing the territorial boundaries of their colonies, the colonialists did not consider family houses, farmlands, communities, and markets. The indigenes themselves in carrying out their daily transactions have – intentionally or inadvertently – ignored these territorial boundaries. That is why a man’s house might be in Guinea while his rice farm is in Liberia, and vice versa. As a result, when people heard that Ebola had hit Guinea, everybody believed that it was just a matter of time before it hit Liberia and Sierra Leone. When it eventually struck Liberia in early April, everybody was scared but nobody was surprised. We were all advised to avoid every form of body contact: sign of peace was proscribed in the Churches, hugs and handshakes were suppressed, touching of dead bodies was discouraged. Unnecessary public gatherings were discouraged; even contact games like football and basketball were suspended. Buckets filled with chlorinated water were placed at the entrance to every public building (including Churches) and the hand sanitizer became what people frequently carry about.

Doctors wearing the Ebola full protection gear.
From the Missions

ITS INFLUENCE ON OUR PASTORAL WORK

However, some people did not believe and so went about shaking hands, hugging the sick and touching dead bodies. As a result, the virus spread like wildfire. ‘This too shall soon pass away,’ was what people around us kept saying. ‘We survived the war; we shall also survive this one,’ they thought. Their confidence rubbed off on us missionaries and we kept working in their midst in spite of calls and pleas from our families and friends to come home. Then Fr Miguel Pajares (my confessor) and Brother Patrick died. They were good friends. Within the same period, thirteen nurses contracted it and died within ten days. Some of them were my parishioners. It then dawned on us that the epidemic was dangerously close. We felt it was about time we raised our guards. So we began to avoid every action, pastoral and social, that brought us into direct physical contact with people. Baptism, anointing of the sick, and laying on of hands were suspended (Fr Miguel contracted Ebola by anointing Patrick Sawyer’s sister). Sick calls too were put on hold, we resorted to praying for sick people on phone; this was a pastoral necessity that required a pastoral adjustment. Even the hearing of confessions became a problem since this required the confessor and the penitent getting ‘uncomfortably close.’ Although we still carry on with this Sacrament, we, nevertheless, make sure that the penitent maintains what we consider a reasonable distance. We also take the washing of hands seriously, one has to wash his hands in chlorinated water provided by us before he or she is allowed to enter the Church or the office building. We also make sure to carry the rosary in one pocket and a tube of sanitizer in the other pocket of every pant we wear.

The outbreak of Ebola virus has really impinged on our pastoral work. Many people, scared of attending any public gathering, have altogether stopped coming to Church. Church meetings outside the Holy Mass are almost non-existent, and people are reluctant to have even the priest come over to their homes. So one has to pray from a distance and watch as a parishioner dies without the last rites. Infants born have to live without being baptized for the time being. Ordinations to the priesthood have also been put on hold since this requires the laying on of hands, anointing, and clerical hugs.

SMILING IN THE MIDST OF THE GLOOM.

Nevertheless, our pastoral ministry is still progressing. People have learnt to smile in the midst of the gloom. We as missionaries still continue to minister to the people, giving them hope that God still loves them, Ebola notwithstanding. We also work in league with health workers to educate the people on the detection of the virus and its prevention. Words of encouragement and hope are not lacking, neither are fervent prayers to God for divine intervention. The words of Saint Paul in Romans 8, 35: ‘What can separate us from the love of God?’ have become words of confidence and hope for us all, the missionaries and the people alike. Working in Liberia in this Ebola situation has made me to closely examine my missionary calling. It has enabled me to go back to the purpose of my choice to become a missionary priest, prompting me to thank God for giving me the privilege to spread his word and administer his blessings in the midst of people who are literally downtrodden, albeit, crushed by a strange and deadly ailment.

WE NEED YOUR PRAYERS AND SUPPORT

We encourage all believers, inasmuch as they pray for the citizens of the Ebola ravaged countries, to pray also for and support the foreign missionaries and health workers in these three countries. Importantly, pray that we do not lose faith, abandon the people of God, and run away. The consequence of this action would be devastating on the people. Pray also that we do not contract Ebola in the course of our ministry. Since most people prefer to stay indoors and avoid every physical contact, economic activities have been seriously hampered. People can no longer sell their goods because buyers are few, many people no longer go to the offices, institutions of learning are shut down, and paid jobs have moved from scarce to almost non-existent. Hunger is gradually setting in. Prayers for these countries are essential, but our concern should not end there. Thus, they need our material aid. Imposing travel bans on them should not translate to completely isolating and abandoning them at this dire point in their collective existence. They need our prayers, support and encouragement. Let us remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 25, 40: ‘whatsoever you do to the least of my brethren that you do unto me.’ This, actually, is the time to put words aside and do something for The Master.
EXTRAORDINARY SYNOD:
Between Rigidity and Compassion

By Fr. Valentine Iheanacho, MSP

The institute of the Synod of Bishops is an advisory body to help the Pope in his Petrine ministry with regard to the governance of the universal Church. It is not a form of a collegial system of governance of the universal Church, but an instrument through which the Pope, as it were, gets to feel the pulse from the “margin” of the Church. As presently constituted, the synod of bishops was established on September 15, 1965 by now Blessed Pope Paul VI as the Second Vatican Council was in its fourth and final session. A synod of bishops when convoked by the Pope can be “ordinary” in which case it is held at fixed intervals and discusses specific issues or matters that directly affect the universal Church. An ordinary synod can also be convoked by the Pope for a particular geographical area like the last African Synod of Bishops in 2009, which focused specifically on the mission of the Church in Africa with particular reference to peace and reconciliation in the continent. The first of such synod for Africa was held in 1994. Similar synods have been held for other continents like those for Asia in 1998, America in 1997, Europe in 1991 and 1999 as well as for the Middle East in 2010. These synods with particular attention on a particular geographical region of the Church have an additional prefix “Special” attached to them. For example, the two synods for Africa are referred to as “Special Synod of Bishops for Africa.”

However, the 2014 synod falls within the category of “extraordinary” synod which, going by its nature, was convoked by the present Pope to treat an urgent matter of particular importance to the universal Church. Since the establishment of the Synod of Bishops in 1965, only three of such “extraordinary” synods have been held so far. The first extraordinary synod was held in 1969, four years after the close of Vatican II, and it considered the theme: “Cooperation between the Holy See and the Episcopal Conferences.” It was convoked by Pope Paul VI. The second was convoked by Pope John Paul II in 1985, and its theme was “The Twentieth Anniversary of the Conclusion of the Second Vatican Council.” The third of such synod is the 2014 Extraordinary Synod, convoked by Pope Francis, which took place in the Vatican City from October 5-19, and it considered the theme: “The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization.” Apart from discussing a specific matter of particular urgent concern, an extraordinary synod is different from an ordinary synod by its composition. While an extraordinary synod involves mainly presidents of Episcopal conferences and cardinals, an ordinary synod is larger and involves several elected representatives from each Episcopal conference including cardinals. The 2014 extraordinary synod is a prelude to the ordinary synod of bishops to be held from October 4-25, 2015 on the theme: “The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World.”

Already the final documents of the last extraordinary synod which are in three parts: the final report, the shorter message to the Church and Pope Francis’ final speech at the synod, have formed the nucleus of the Lineamenta – an initial preparatory document for the 2015 ordinary synod.

Like any major event in our hyper-information age, the 2014 extraordinary synod, to use the word of Pope Francis, received “abundant” coverage. As it is often the...
case in journalistic-shaped opinions, everyone saw and heard what they wanted to see and hear. With the noise and distractions that ensued on the heels of the first week report of the synod: *relatio post disceptionem* (literally translated as “report after the debate), most people tend to forget that the 2014 extraordinary synod discussed a wider range of issues that affect family life in the contemporary world. The challenges that confront the family are myriad and the synod participants were not oblivious of this fact. The bishops in their discussions spread their binoculars to some social problems like the effects of war, immigration, hunger, domestic violence, polygamy, inter-religious marriages, cohabitation, divorce and remarriage. The question of homosexuality and same-sex marriage was just one of the many issues and not even the core of the synodal conclusion. From the outset, Archbishop Bruno Forte (special secretary of the Synod) told the synod delegates that “the doctrine of the Church is not up for discussion” since the synod was convoked as part of Pope Francis’ pastoral approach geared towards reaching out to Catholics and to help them live their faith within the challenges and contradictions of the contemporary epoch. Pope Francis himself, immediately after the synod, asserted that: “Nobody mentioned homosexual marriage at the synod, it did not cross our minds. The synod addressed the family and the homosexual persons in relation to their families, because we come across this reality all the time in the confessional: a father and a mother whose son or daughter is in that situation. We have to find a way to help that father or that mother to stand by their son or daughter.”

From a personal vantage point, the 2014 extraordinary synod must be understood through the mindset of Pope Francis, who convoked it. The Pope from Argentina has not left anyone in doubt about the direction of his pontificate: *first embrace and then preach the Gospel.* This is the pastoral approach of his pontificate. Too much attention given to same-sex marriage, steals away the attention that should be given to a much heavier pastoral question: divorce and remarriage of many good Catholics who may have made a mistake in their first marriages but found a lasting marital union in a second marriage. How does the Church care for such good and sincere sons and daughters who want to move on with their lives and still remain practicing Catholics? The old formula and ready-made answer: “remain celibates!” is no longer sufficient and does not address the issue. A better approach must be found and the bishops even in the next synod cannot shy away from this protruding pastoral problem. In the final speech at the close of the synod, Pope Francis put the bishops on guard against two irreconcilable positions: “hostile rigidity” and “false sense of mercy.” One clear-cut position that does not admit any compromise is not right.

The Church in wrestling with contemporary challenges faced by Christian families must chart a middle course and in doing so, everyone, beginning with the bishops, must avoid the four temptations highlighted by Pope Francis. The four temptations are: (1) a “hostile inflexibility” to the letter of the law; (2) a “deceptive mercy that binds the wounds without first curing them and treating them; that treats the symptoms and not the causes and the roots;” (3) the tendency “to transform the bread into stone and cast it against the sinners” and (4) “to bow down to a worldly spirit instead of purifying it and bending it to the Spirit of God.” The bishops as our fathers in the faith have a lot of work to do in fashioning out ways to accompany married people in their faith journey. Hiding under the cloak of abstract moral principles whether for or against contemporary trends in family issues is not just enough! There must be a middle way between “hostile inflexibility or rigidity” and an outright permissive “compassion.” This attitude is not a novelty in the teaching and life of the Church. St Thomas Aquinas, for instance, is known, among other things in his moral teaching which states that “virtu in medio stat” which translates as “virtue stands in the middle.”
The Missionary Society of St. Paul lost two priest members recently: Fr. Christopher Stephen Ganga, MSP died on October 19, 2014 after an auto crash and was buried on Friday, October 24, 2015. Fr. Steven Achi, MSP died on February 9, 2015 after a brief illness and was buried on March 3, 2015. Both of them were buried at the MSP cemetery located within the MSP seminary in Gwagwalada-Abuja, Nigeria.

In his tribute to the Late Fr. Christopher Ganga, his classmate Fr. Louis Takuso, MSP recalled how he met Fr. Ganga: “We met in October 2005 when young Chris reported to Iperu Remo for the two-year formation programme. We just seemed to hit it off as friends. We became very close as the years kept passing. He is fondly remembered by so many as a multi-talented young man. He was such a gifted orator who captivates his audience and people never seemed to be tired of listening to him. The few Sundays he preached in Paiko-Minna where he ministered before his death, parishioners always called to tell me that they were so happy and enriched anytime they went for Mass by his preaching “his tongue was as nimble as the pen of a scribe” with the use of scripture which initially earned him the nickname, “Apollos” from his classmates. Scripture seems to flow from his mouth without hindrance. Gangarus (Latinized version of his surname which I fondly call him) was a gifted and passionate singer and dancer. He was antiphonist (cantor) several times in the seminary and featured in the maiden seminary album. He was a valuable member of the Acapella group in the seminary. He was a talented actor. He played the leading role in the dramas our seminary. You needed to see Ganga playing football. He was a delight to watch. As a student, he was so dedicated to duty. I remember when we served as MCs he always made sure that liturgical functions were both orderly and prayerful. He was a prayerful person. His being prayerful was the reason I usually affix God to his name. I sometimes called him OgheneGanga or OluwaGanga or AbdulGanga. Gangarus makes friends so easily. Revd Fr Chris, you are not dead!!! You live in our hearts forever. It is painful but we thank God for the moments we shared together. Gangarus, your favourite quote in the scripture was Psalm 36:9 “In your light Lord, we see light”. Let that light continue to shine on you as you rest in the bosom of the Lord. Till we meet to part no more.”

The Late Fr. Stephen Achi, MSP was ordained on June 22, 1985 and ministered for 29 years before he died. He was one of the MSP pioneer missionaries to Liberia mission from 1986 to 1988. He ministered in the diocese of Sokoto, Nigeria from 2009 until his death.

May the souls of Frs. Christopher Ganga, MSP and Stephen Achi, MSP rest in peace. May God console their biological families and their religious family of the Missionary Society of St. Paul!
Reaching out to Others

Despite giant strides attained in the use of the social media through the information and communications technology, the world today is witnessing a crisis of individualism. Many people are lonely, retreating more and more into their own shells, creating their own little circles and corners wherein they just mind their business. They expect others to mind their business too. Some find it difficult to relate well with their neighbors. In fact, there are people who probably don’t care to find out who their neighbors are. Even within families, among friends, colleagues and associations there are people who prefer to go it alone. Probably based on their previous experience(s) or those of others, they are afraid of the other and so are closed up within themselves. They thus glory in unnecessary secrecy, exhibit mistrust, pretence, eye-service, insincerity, and betrayal even in the few relationships that they manage to keep. Fences and walls with locked-up gates have become the hallmark of modern architecture, all in a bid to ensure security against intruders. The ghetto mentality makes us sometimes discriminate against people who are different from us in terms of race, tribe, religion, and social status. There are also some of our public servants who only feel safe to travel out of their lonely havens in the company of a plethora of security agents and thugs, whose main duty is to keep people away from them so that they can be on their own. Even marital partners could be lonely, avoiding communication and contacts with each other. Indeed, there are many who would not speak out for others or dare to stick out their heads for others, and would not want anyone to reach out to them under any circumstance, simply because they want to be left alone. Many concrete examples abound in our own lives and in the lives of people we know.

As Christians we are challenged over and over again by Jesus to REACH OUT TO OTHERS! The major reason why we should reach out to others is that God, in Jesus Christ, has reached out to us. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. Through the incarnation and birth of Jesus, God reached out to the world. God reached out to the world in order to transform the world for the better. Through the coming of Jesus, God reached out with compassion and love to all, irrespective of background and standing. Jesus did not need permission to reach out to people. He broke into lonely hearts, doing so as part of his effort to bring everyone into the kingdom of God. By reaching out to others, Jesus gave life and hope to so many. He reached out to sinners, and gave them a new direction in their lives. So much was the effect of his reaching out to sinners that Zacchaeus the tax collector had to declare: “I give half my belongings, Lord, to the poor. If I have defrauded anyone in the least, I pay him back fourfold” (Luke 19:8). Jesus reached out to the marginalized and the oppressed. He elevated those considered as lowly, and cared for the sick. He reached out to children, and gave them a new status in the kingdom of God. He reached out to the hungry, to lepers, to the physically challenged. He reached out to heal, forgive, bless, share, and love. He took risks, and acted promptly on behalf of the woman caught in adultery. He reached out to the dead and to those who mourned them.

Jesus taught his disciples too to reach out. He appointed seventy two and sent them out to bring peace, healing and blessings to homes and towns (Luke 10:1-9). He instructed the disciples to go out to the whole world and proclaim the good news (Matt 28:19; Acts 1:8). They should, therefore, reach out to all creation. This, now, is the challenge facing us as we reflect on the great mystery of God reaching out to the world through the birth of Jesus. Are we too ready to reach out to others? Or are we too comfortable or fearful to reach out?

Reach out to someone today, and someone will reach out to you!
Sixty Good Years

During this Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis urged the church to look to the past with gratitude, to live the present with passion and to embrace the future with hope. Looking back with profound joy to God, Rev. Sr. (Dr.) Léonie McSweeney celebrates her Diamond Jubilee Anniversary in religious life. She looks back with gratitude and shares her story and inspiration for the past years in her service to humanity. Congratulations!

It is with pleasure I respond to the editor’s invitation to inform Ambassador Readers about my Diamond Jubilee. What have the last sixty years meant to me since I was professed as a Sister of the Medical Missionaries of Mary (MMM) in 1954? Please help me to thank God for so much.

Shortly after I qualified as a medical doctor in Ireland, I was appointed to Nigeria, where I arrived in 1960, a few months before Nigeria’s Independence and it is with pleasure I have been working here for the last 54 years. My first assignment was to St. Mary’s Hospital in Urua Akpan, Akwa Ibom State until the war-time when I worked in St. Luke’s hospital, Anua in Akwa Ibom State and later in Ondo and Ibadan respectively.

INTERVENTION OF OUR BISHOPS

For sixteen years I was involved mainly in routine medicine, surgery and obstetrics in which I felt happily fulfilled. Then in 1976 things changed. In a small way I had begun to teach Billings Method locally around our hospital in Ondo, which came to the attention of my SMA Bishop, Bishop Field, who informed Cardinal Ekandem, may the Lord rest their souls in his peace. Because of my efforts to promote modern natural family planning, the Cardinal invited me to address the next Bishops’ Conference of our Bishops. The initial headquarters was in Ondo and later was transferred to Ibadan. Without doubt, this remarkable development was made possible by the great, untiring generosity of so many ordinary men and women, mostly non-medical, in giving their time, energy and the conviction of how they could help family life. So many of our people are truly wonderful and I make this statement with utter conviction.

In 1979 teaching had reached thirteen Dioceses and P.L.A.N. (Pro-Family Life Association of Nigeria) was formally inaugurated in Ibadan, in the presence of four of our Bishops. The initial headquarters was in Ondo and later was transferred to Ibadan. Without doubt, this remarkable development was made possible by the great, untiring generosity of so many ordinary men and women, mostly non-medical, in giving their time, energy and the conviction of how they could help family life. So many of our people are truly wonderful and I make this statement with utter conviction.

A FEW HIGHLIGHTS

* In 1983 Dr. John Billings came to Nigeria and visited ten States, ending in Kaduna. There was a cavalcade of cars to meet him as he approached the city of Aba. What struck him most was the success in our special way of preselecting boys and girls. He invited me to begin a special detailed research on the subject which we did. The result was 96% success in selecting boys and 89% for girls. It is harder to get a baby girl. And this success is continuing, seemingly better than ever. Dr. Billings was also happy to observe our success in helping childless couples to have children.

* In February, 2014 the National Directorate seminar held in Onitsha was attended by eighty men and women, representing 25 Dioceses, and all so full of enthusiasm. There was particular determination expressed to do all they could to relieve the suffering of so many couples and especially women, who have no male children. We need to make more efforts to publicize the fact that they can be helped. Members were convinced that Sex-Preselection actually raises the status of women in the end.

* In 2009 it was my pleasure to be presented with the honor of M.F.R. (Member of the Federal Republic) in Abuja. The President invited me to say the Closing Prayer. I ended it by raising my hands saying “Allah, we praise you”. There was an explosion of laughter and a big clap. My joy was shared by all.

* In 2012 I am happy to say I have been granted Dual Citizenship, and so as well as being Irish I am also a Nigerian.

* A special great joy for me now is that a young vibrant MMM Sister has been appointed to join me in P.L.A.N. with a view to future leadership.

Please help me to thank God for all he has done for me and for my wonderful health. May he bless and reward the many leaders of P.L.A.N. who have added much to my joy and happiness.

Dr. (Sr.) Leonie McSweeney, MB, MMM, MFR

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Daily Prayer for MSP

Heavenly Father, you created us and you care for us:
We thank you for taking the Missionary Society of St. Paul into your care.
We ask you to continue to watch over us. Fill us with your love, and help us to build a family where each member irrespective of tribe, feels at home with other members and is encouraged to give his best in the missionary work.

Lord Jesus, you died for us and you call us to be your witnesses to the ends of the earth; we thank you for enabling us to participate in this your saving work among people of every race. Fill us with zeal and a sense of commitment like St. Paul, to bear witness to your love and reconciliation. Help us with a lifestyle that will make us proclaim your Word with power and conviction. Send us your grace to make good whatever is lacking in us as individuals and as a Society.

O Holy Spirit, you enlightened the hearts of the apostles, we beseech you now to continue to enlighten us and consecrate us in the truth. May each of us realize how invaluable our contributions can be, and thus invest our energies towards the success of our missionary endeavours. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our Lady Queen of Apostles, pray for us
St. Paul our Patron, pray for us,
May the souls of our departed MSP brothers, AMSP brothers and sisters, and the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.
Amen.
(To be said daily by all MSP and AMSP)

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