

# EXTENDING THE REALITY OF THE INCARNATION

## A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

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THE SHCJ constitutions state that our mission is to extend in our world, in our time and in our different contexts, "the reality of the incarnation".<sup>1</sup> It further defines this mission as "helping others to know and believe that God lives and acts in them, and in our world, and to rejoice in his presence".<sup>2</sup> This mission to others presupposes that we ourselves know and believe that God lives and acts in us - as individuals, as communities, and as a Society - and that we too rejoice in the divine presence:

What we have seen and heard we are telling you, so that you too may be in union with us as we are in union with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing this to you to make our own joy complete. (I John 1:3-4)

In the light of this truth, this issue of **Source** invites us to reflect on and share with one another the different ways in which we have understood and have been able to carry out this mission both within our SHCJ community and in the wider human community. This article is a theological reflection on our mission. It is my prayer that the sharing of our reflections will fill us with even greater divine energy and zeal. The reflection touches on two main points: my understanding of the reality of incarnation, which we are called to extend, and possible ways of doing this.

### Understanding the Reality of the Incarnation

'Incarnation', we recall, derives from the Latin **carnis** which the Vulgate employs to translate the Hebrew **baser** or Greek **sarx**, meaning 'flesh'. In biblical thought 'flesh' denotes a 'human being' as opposed to God.<sup>3</sup> John's gospel declares that "the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us" (1:14). Incarnation has to do essentially with becoming human. In the person of Jesus in time, God's Word, who existed before the beginning of time, was God, and was wholly oriented towards God (Jn 1:1-2), became a human being like any of us, and lived among us.

Those who were with him, and who had the eyes of faith to see beyond the ordinariness of his humanity, were able to perceive in him, across this very ordinariness, the glory of God's unique and uniquely beloved Son "full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14). Because of their abiding personal contact with the Word who is life, gives life and sustains life, John and his believing companions were able to proclaim him to others. They proclaimed what they had personally seen of him, watched with their own eyes and touched with their own hands. They did this in order to attract others to join their union with God. Through this proclamation the believers extended the reality of the incarnation in their own context, and sought to complete their joy (I Jn 1:1-4).

Extending the reality of the incarnation has to do with activity which involves our body and its senses: hearing, seeing, watching, touching; and our hearts: rejoicing. The reality is the Word who is life. If, therefore, incarnation is to take place in our own time and contexts, and be viewed not simply as a past historical event, but as a living process,<sup>4</sup> we will need to seek ways of giving this Word a physical flesh like ours. Then, through us, people today will also be empowered to see, watch, touch, and become attracted to it, and so join our union or 'fellowship' with God. How do we do this? The answer is embodied in the Constitutions and the documents from our general chapters. Here I simply highlight five ways in which I think it can be done.

### Ways of Extending the Reality of the Incarnation

#### 1. Recognising and Affirming the Importance of the Body

In God's plan, the event of incarnation began in the body of a woman, Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus. Mary's body was the one from which Jesus, through the action of the Holy Spirit, took one hundred per cent his own human 'flesh', which he pitched as a tent among us. Another woman, Elizabeth, was the first to recognize and praise this divine deed through the action of the same Holy Spirit, and she declared that Mary was "filled with grace" (Luke 1:39-45). The Son who was born of her was also declared to be "full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14). Hence extending the reality of the incarnation requires, first and foremost, that we offer our bodies to Jesus today in our own way but as concretely as Mary offered him hers, so that he can become concretely 'flesh', human in our own time, in and through us.

Offering our bodies to Jesus entails, first, recognizing that, paradoxically, our bodies already belong to him. Through baptism, we are members of his body (I Cor 6:15; 12:27), temples of his Spirit (I Cor 3:16) and branches of his vine (Jn 15:1-8). As a result we treat our bodies and those of others with the respect which belong to Jesus (cf Acts 9:5). This is important since, on the one hand, we emerge from a past tradition of spirituality which thrived on "contempt for the body", a body which had to be tamed and subjugated to the advantage of the soul;<sup>5</sup> and on the other hand, we live in an age which believes in pampering the body and is allergic to any type of inconvenience and suffering. A fuller understanding of the mystery of incarnation requires that we look today on this type of spirituality and this attitude to the body as 'anti-incarnational'. They can never lead to that fullness of "grace and truth" which is an integral part of the reality of the incarnation:

You who wanted no sacrifice or oblation prepared a body for me.

You took no pleasure in holocausts or sacrifices, for sin; then I said... 'God, here I am! I am coming to do your will. (Heb 10:6-7)

What then do we do with the body that God has given to us? How did Jesus use his body in the gospels? How does he want to use our bodies today?

These questions invite us individually and communally to study the gospels, and through prayer, meditation and celebration, to see, watch and observe how Jesus used his body as good news "in order to help others grow strong in faith and lead fully human lives".<sup>6</sup> Since his is the reality that we are to extend, not our own, we need to be in touch with him and really get to know him through the gospels. Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we apply in our own dif-



parent contexts the principle learnt from him of "reverence for the dignity of every human being".<sup>7</sup> Then his presence in our life brings joy to others as it did to Elizabeth and her unborn child when Mary visited them. It empowers others to extend the reality of the incarnation in their own lives and contexts.

In addition to affirming the goodness of our bodies, extending the reality of the incarnation requires equally that we affirm the goodness of creation. Traditional prayers have led us to view our world as a 'valley of tears', or a 'barren land' through which we journey as pilgrims to our heavenly home. But divine revelation declares that God who created the world found it to be "very good" (Gen 1:31). If then our corporate sin has reduced the world to a valley of tears, we who believe in the reality of the incarnation "accept our share of responsibility" for this sin,<sup>8</sup> and live in such a way as to proclaim that the world is indeed good because God made it good and because Jesus entered into it and redeemed it. The modern concern with ecology and environmental issues shows that our world has suddenly woken up to the fact that creation is not to be used and abused by human beings for their selfish satisfaction, but is rather to be tended and cared for as God originally intended (Gen 2:15). Traditionally people spoke of 'mother earth'; today we need to engage seriously in 'mothering the earth' as part of our effort to extend the reality of the incarnation. For the earth too is destined to share in the redemption brought about by the incarnate Son of God (Rom 8:19-22).

### 2. Seeing the Body and Creation as Eucharist

Next to affirming the goodness of the body and of creation, we need to see his body and creation as 'Eucharist'. Eucharist has to do with giving thanks, breaking ourselves as bread, giving and serving it to others to nourish their life. The Constitutions remind us that the Eucharist is the source, center and summit of our life in Christ, in community and in the apostolate.<sup>9</sup> At the celebration of the first Eucharist, Jesus asked his disciples to do continually what he had done 'in memory' of him. To my understanding this did not simply mean celebrating the Eucharist daily at mass as a ritual. This we can do without too much cost to ourselves. But in the context of his passion, death and resurrection, Jesus was asking that we, in turn, make our bodies and the realities which nourish us and sustain our life (our breads and our wines) a Eucharist for one another the way he did. That he wanted us to do this in memory of him is confirmed by the commandment which he gave as the one new commandment of 'the new Covenant' in his blood: that we love one another even as he has loved us (Jn 13:34; 15:12). It is through this ultimate or extreme love that we are known as his followers (Jn 13:25).

Some years ago Becky Gaba embarked on a project in the Washington D C area called SOME (So that Others May Eat). The project sought to encourage the rich and not so very rich to share their bread with the hungry and clothe the naked. Our 1986 general chapter focus on justice with compassion also heightened our awareness of the need to have a special concern for the poor, whatever our ministry, and to help them to lead fully human lives: spiritually, intellectually, politically, economically and otherwise.

These types of focus and outreach constitute an integral part of our mission to extend the reality of the incarnation. Jesus told his disciples who were com-

plaining that they did not have enough to feed the people, that it was for them to give the people something to eat (Matt 14:13-21). Furthermore, he promised that a cup of water given to the least of his followers was given to him personally and would not go without its reward (Matt 10:42). An issue of **Source** was devoted to **justice with compassion** after the 1986 general chapter. The continuous planning and evaluation of our efforts in this regard lasted till the 1992 chapter. These efforts testify to the seriousness with which we as a Society committed ourselves to making the needs of the poor and oppressed a special concern in our ministries.<sup>10</sup>

But equally important, if not more so, is the need for us to be Eucharist to one another through our enabling presence. Eucharist, we have seen, has to do with activities which involve the body: "You wanted neither sacrifice nor holocaust...but a body you have given me." "Greater love has no one than to lay down one's life for one's friends." "Have you time? I want to be with you."<sup>11</sup> Jesus spent whole days being with the crowds and meeting the needs of all kinds of individuals who flocked to him. At times he even sacrificed his well deserved rest and that of his disciples to meet the needs of the poor who were like sheep without a shepherd (Matt 9:35-37; Mark 6:30-56). But he was equally conscious of and faithful to the need to be alone with his disciples and teach them about the kingdom of God and their mission. One of his main reasons for choosing them was so that they might be his companions in the mission (Mark 3:1319). His visits and enabling presence to his women disciples, Martha and Mary, made them memorable characters in the gospel. Indeed, the entire purpose of his incarnate mission was to "gather into one all the scattered children of God" (Jn 11:52). He accomplished this work of reconciliation in his own body broken on the cross (cf Eph 2:22).

So we return to the question: how do we break the bread of our bodies and lives so that others may eat, live and have life in all its fullness (Jn 10:10)? How do we serve as life companions, journeying companions and enabling companions to one another? Often is it easier to be an enabling presence to people we meet in our ministries than to those we live with in community or in the Society. The challenge is whether we can be such companions to one another, day in and day out. In some cases this might entail giving a helping hand to a project that may not seem directly our concern. In other instances it might mean cutting short our holidays and times at the beach in order to give a hand in the infirmaries so that somebody else may have a break, and we may help our aging sisters to carry the burden of illness and old age. It will be for each of us to identify ways within our own contexts by which we can provide this type of enabling presence to one another. It must surely cost us if we want to be in deed and in truth Eucharist to one another.

To use a personal example, as one who is currently living at a distance of about four hours drive away from my community, I feel a special responsibility to ensure that my presence to the Society is real. That is why, for instance, I never say no to any request for service made to me by the province or Society, if I can possibly help it within the ever-growing demands of my/our ministry here at CIWA and beyond. Moreover I see myself as representing the Society and making it present here at CIWA and in my national and international involvements, even as the Society itself is meant to be God's ambassador (cf II Cor



5:20). That is why I always have SHCJ after my name, whatever the context - though at times editors and typists leave it out. Doing this helps me to consolidate my belief that through the mystery of the incarnation Jesus united himself with the whole of humanity; so we in him do the same,<sup>12</sup> and in a special way all of us in the Society form one corporate body.<sup>13</sup>

This reflection on extending the reality of the incarnation invites each of us to identify ways by which we can concretely and realistically share our lives, time, talents and gifts with one another so that we may all grow through our membership in the Society to that maturity of Christ to which we are destined by God's grace (Eph 4:13, 15-16). The ministry in which each of us is engaged, in and through the Society, constitutes the primary means by which we can concretely extend the reality of the incarnation, be it administration, formation, teaching, caring for the sick, the aged and mentally disabled or challenging the root causes of injustice in church and society: whatever dehumanizes and marginalizes any of God's children.

Jesus himself did the same in the gospels. He confronted injustice everywhere he met it; broke down religious and socio-cultural barriers and taboos, especially about women (cf Luke 7:36-8:3; 10:38-42);<sup>14</sup> he was innovative in his theological and pastoral ministries (cf Matt 7:28-29). He integrated social outcasts among his closest followers to show that every person was equally valued by God (cf Luke 5:27-32; 19:1-10; Matt 9:9-13). He wishes to continue to do the same today in and through us, the living, visible members of his body. These are concrete ways by which people will be led to see, touch and feel the reality of the Word who is life, gives life and sustains life.

All this is not new. But what is needed is for us to see this call to be in truth living members of Christ and of one another as part of our mission to extend the reality of the incarnation, and be Eucharist to one another. When we do, we will derive greater divine energy and courageous zeal to stay poised and not give up when trials come. Indeed we cannot take our bodies, give thanks and break them for one another and for others without them pinching us somehow and somewhere.

### 3. Being Ready to Carry the Cross

In addition to requiring that we affirm the goodness of the body and of creation and be Eucharist in our communities and places of work, extending the reality of the incarnation necessarily and inevitably demands that we carry the cross. This cross which Jesus says we are to carry along with him and after him (Matt 16:24-28; Jn 12:24-26) is different from the ordinary hardships which we encounter daily as we engage in our different ministries, though this is bad enough. The cross of Jesus was more than difficulties of the apostolic calling, such as insufficient time to rest, hunger, thirst, or lack of a place to lay his head.

Jesus' cross meant suffering ingratitude and misunderstanding. It meant being misjudged, falsely accused, betrayed and finally put to death in a most shameful way. Paul gives a vivid description of this as it applied to him in his own context: he summarized it as "being consigned to death daily" (cf II Cor 4:711, esp v 11). Cornelia called it being trained in the school of "accepted suffering".<sup>15</sup> This type of cross is the inevitable consequence of trying to be light

that shines in darkness, but is not overpowered by it (John 1:5; 3:21; 8:12; cf Matt 11:14-16). Light cannot shine in darkness without being affected by the darkness. A candle lit during the day hardly projects any light; but lit at night in a dark room, it lights up the room, protesting the darkness.

If we are really serious about extending the reality of the incarnation in our lives, we are sure to meet with this type of suffering and cross right where we are. But one thing is certain, that when borne resolutely, even expected and welcomed with "joy" (cf Acts 5:40-41) this cross becomes the birth stool of the new life in Christ for us and for those who give us the cross to carry. In Christ these birth pangs are soon forgotten for joy that we and others have found new and real life in him (John 16:21). God raised Jesus from the dead, exalted him and made his the only name by which we may be saved (cf Acts 4:10-12; Phil 2:6-11). We cannot hope to share in his resurrection and exaltation if we do not share in his passion and death (cf Jn 12:24-26). This brings us to the next point of our reflection which is closely connected with carrying the cross.

### 4. Living the Vows as Integral Aspects of the Reality of the Incarnation

The vows of chastity, poverty and obedience offer us unique and almost unlimited possibilities of extending the reality of the incarnation. They also offer us unique opportunities for joining God in his surpassing love for all his children, even the undeserving (chastity), in his infinite generosity towards all his creatures (poverty) and in his determined will that all should be saved (obedience).<sup>16</sup> The Constitutions invite us to take part in the "self-emptying of the Son in the mission which he joyfully accepted from the Father".<sup>17</sup> This self-emptying is different from, though related to the cross as described above. For Jesus it meant laying aside in some mysterious way his divinity so that he could create room for or put on our humanity, and ultimately incorporate all of us.<sup>18</sup> This is the point of the hymn in Phil 2:6-7; it is also the point made by Paul in II Cor 8:9: "Remember how generous the Lord Jesus was - he was rich, but he became poor for your sake, to make you rich out of his poverty." Jesus himself declares that he now calls us, his followers, friends rather than slaves because he has made known to us all that he has learnt from the Father (Jn 15:15).

As Christ's self-emptying was aimed at enriching us in every way and raising us to the status of child in his own intimate relationship with his Father, so should the vows by which we share in the self-emptying lead us to enrich others concretely in our own life situations. Our vow of poverty opens our heart to recognize and accept the goodness of creation. It further moves us concretely to seek ways by which we can share with others the things which are intimately ours - our knowledge, skills of all kinds - and not hide anything from one another or share only partially what we know, so that we may continue to be 'one up' on one another. Our vow of obedience invites us to engage in the sustained search for and doing of God's will in a world which is becoming more and more self-dependent and behaving as though it did not need God. It was not very different in Jesus' day, yet he found his only *raison d'être*, his life's food, in doing the will of God (Jn 4:34; 17:4).

Our vow of chastity opens us to the riches of God's love, of a God who is love (I Jn 4:16), and whose Son knows how to love without reserve and without recall (Jn 13:1; 15:13). It is a delight to know that our vow of chastity, like



hose of poverty and obedience, is something very positive when viewed from God's perspective. Above all, this vow invites us to seek to heal the barriers of race, sex and class (Jew and Gentile, slave and free born, male and female) which Jesus' supreme love demolished on the cross (Gal 3:28; cf Col 3:11; I Cor 12:13). The barriers of race, sex and class are the three foundational barriers on which all other human divisions and hatred are based. Put differently, our vow of chastity constitutes the heart of our participation in Jesus' ministry of love and reconciliation. Through it we embrace one another and all God's children with God's own love.

As a Society we are richly endowed with opportunities to break down these barriers. We have a plurality of races, classes (first world and third world) and cultures among us. In our different ministries we work with men and are given ample opportunity to relate to them in a healthy way so as to heal our broken humanity; but not at the expense of women! The African province, for instance, already has two male associate members, a layman and a priest. If we are not consciously promoting this wholeness in our actions, attitudes and relationships, something very fundamental is missing from our efforts to extend the reality of the incarnation.

The melting pot of the race, class and culture mix in the Society is located in the African province. Here we do not only have Africans, Americans and Europeans; among the Africans we have a multiplicity of nations and ethnic groups: Chanaians and Nigerians; Housas, Efiks, Yorubas, Igbos, Ibibios etc. The mission to extend the reality of the incarnation challenges us to make this rich diversity an asset rather than a liability. If we do not gather with Christ, we scatter; there is no neutrality here. Any moves we make that cause divisions within or outside the Society are anti-incarnational. Our rich mixtures are ingredients which God gives us to enable us to extend the reality of the incarnation right where we are, among ourselves. They invite us to start extending this reality from within, in the very womb of the province and Society, just as Jesus started his life in the womb of Mary. Only then, as Christ's bearers, will we have the eyes to perceive that others have no wine, and be morally equipped to tell them to do whatever Jesus tells them or lead them to seek and find God present and active in their lives and world and to rejoice in his presence.

In this way, through us, the wider African society which is riddled from north to south and east to west with all kinds of divisions will learn that in Christ it is possible to transcend all these divisions and live as brothers and sisters. But we cannot love in this way without being ready to pay the price for it. Jesus' supreme act of love and reconciliation took place in his body broken on the cross. The oneness and unity of believers happens in this broken body. In this body he assumed all categories of persons and claimed them as himself; all form one person in him (Gal 3:25-28). Through the cross he reconciled human beings to God, to one another and to creation. The mission to extend the reality of the incarnation encourages us assiduously to study ways of claiming one another and all God's children as our own, the way Christ has claimed us, and to do this as individuals, communities, provinces and as the Society. This gives us a share in God's life.

## 5. Striving for the Ultimate Goal: Communion

Finally, though not exhaustively, the call to extend the reality of the incarnation urges us to keep ever in view the goal of the entire enterprise, which is joy

in the communion fellowship among ourselves, with all God's children, the entire creation and in union with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Our world today speaks often of the 'universal brotherhood and sisterhood' of nations, but pays only lip service to it. The growing tendency to form economic blocks and break up once united nations, especially in Europe, is an example of this. Often the formation of these blocks means the increasing isolation of the so-called 'third world' or developing nations especially in Africa. Fortunately our own Society has struggled in this decade to live more concretely its vowed **cor unum** across provinces and cultures and in its own internal structures. The increasing interprovince missioning, of which Chad is the latest new born baby, the global consciousness fund and the nascent Society education fund testify to this.

As well as sharing our assets, we need to do more in terms of sharing our spiritual resources as evenly as possible. By spiritual resources here I mean anything which cannot be valued in terms of money, since joy, acceptance and a sense of belonging are values which money cannot buy. In whatever way we put it, any measure which helps us to internalize and live our oneness to the full stands at the heart of our mission to extend the reality of the incarnation. If we set our minds and attitudes to this, the Holy Spirit who alone can make us really one, will show us the way. The communion mentioned in the last section, and indeed all the points which have been raised in this article call for celebration. Celebration means worship, the orientation of one's entire being towards God, whether as an individual or as a corporate body, the Society. This is the goal. Here too Jesus stands out as the worshipper of the Father par excellence (Jn 4:34).<sup>19</sup> In John's gospel, for instance, his whole life, his being Eucharist, and his passion, death and resurrection are set within the context of Jewish liturgical feasts. His entire life was one prolonged act of worship and praise of the God who sent him. This means that we take prayer and liturgy most seriously as the ever-abiding and over-arching context within which we carry out in diverse ways our one mission of making known the reality of the incarnation.

In this respect we thank God for the insight of the general chapter delegates who decided that the communication from the chapter should take the form of a "worship service" which embodies "an unlimited number of prayer times to be used individually and/or in groups".<sup>20</sup> The document further points out that the single purpose of "the rite" is "to open us to the unimaginable ways in which God reaches us and calls forth to **extend the reality of the incarnation**" (emphasis mine). I interpret this inspiration of the chapter delegates as God calling us as a Society at this particular point in time to join the incarnate Jesus more consciously and deliberately in making our entire lives, individually and as a Society, one continuous act of worship and praise.

So we end with a slightly modified version of the Society prayer from the chapter:

We pray that this time of abiding prayer, alone, and in our gatherings, in our individual and communal ministries, will create the space for our personal hopes and desires, our social, political and SHCJ visions, our commitment to all that Jesus stands for and died for, and our longing for God to be acknowledged and integrated



into our being, among each other and in our world. Then out of our diversity of thoughts, persons, cultures and languages, may we be enabled to commit ourselves in a common vision to live in love; to be Christ's presence in the world, journeying with each other and with all people as women of compassion, imagination, courage and faith.

May the Holy Spirit who brought about the reality of the incarnation starting in the womb of Mary, continue to use our bodies and lives today to make Christ visibly present in our communities, provinces, Society, countries and world. Amen.

#### Footnotes

1. SHCJ *Foundation Texts and Constitutions* 1983 no. 1. Henceforth referred to as Constitutions.
2. Ibid no. 4.
3. See Isa 40:5: 'humankind' shall see the glory of God; and 40:6-7: all 'flesh' is grass. The same word *basar* is used in Hebrew for 'humankind' and 'flesh'.
4. I have elaborated on this point in my article "Inculturation: Biblical/Theological Perspective" in *32 Articles Evaluating Inculturation of Christianity in Africa* (T Okure et al; Spearhead 112-114; Eldoret: AMACEA Gaba Publications 1990) 55-88.
5. *The Imitation of Christ* of Thomas a Kempis, which served as a universal spiritual reading book, offers a classic example of this type of spirituality.
6. Constitutions no. 6.
7. Constitutions no. 5.
8. Constitutions no. 6.
9. Constitutions no. 41.
10. See *Source* 16 Winter 1987.
11. Gregory Norbert OSB "All I Ask of You" in *Listen: Songs of Praise* (Vermont: Weston Priory 1973) no. 5.
12. Constitutions no.6.
13. See *General Chapter* 1986 on "Corporateness".
14. See, for instance, Luke 8:1-2; 23:55-24 Jesus' greatest revolution with respect to women, a fact often overlooked, is that he made them his travelling companions along with the Twelve, all the way from Galilee, through Samaria and Judea, to Jerusalem: to his passion, death and resurrection. Such travelling companionship by women was just unheard of in his time.
15. Cornelia Connelly "Preface" to *Walking with God*; cf Constitutions p 9 note 1.
16. My understanding of the vows from God's perspective is given in my article, "The Challenges of Religious Life in a Culturally Mixed Community" *Shalom* 8/2 (1990) 4-9.
17. Constitutions no. 21.
18. See T Okure "Inculturation" esp pp 67-69 on "Selective assumption for transformation".
19. John 4:34 is to be read against the background of 4:21-25: God's search for true worshippers in spirit and truth. These worshippers are juxtaposed with those who seek honour and glory from one another and cling to their selective ancestral traditions but reject God and Jesus, his agent (John 5. 39-47). See further T Okure *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1-24* (WUNT 2/31; Tübingen: J C B Mohr/Paul Siebeck 1988) 115-117.
20. See "Introduction" to *General Chapter* 1992. The references in this paragraph and those which follow, including the adapted prayer, are all from this "Introduction" p 5.

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