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**CONTEMPORARY MISSION AND CHALLENGES OF RELIGIOUS  
WOMEN CONGREGATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE  
PHILIPPINES AND EAST TIMOR**

**Dissertação Final**

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## Abbreviations

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| AMRSP    | Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines  |
| EA       | <i>Ecclesia in Asia</i> : Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II (1999)  |
| FABC     | Federation of Asia Bishop Conferences  |
| Fretelin | Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente (English: Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor)             |
| GS       | <i>Gaudium et Spes</i> : Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World of Second Vatican Council (1965)          |
| LG       | <i>Lumen Gentium</i> : Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Second Vatican Council (1965)                                |
| Matt     | Matthew  |
| Mark     | Mark   |
| NRSV     | New Revised Standard Version   |
| NCR      | National Catholic Reporter   |
| NA       | <i>Nostra Aetate</i> : Declaration on the Church's Relations with non-Christian Religions of Second Vatican Council (1965) |
| OP       | Order of Preacher  |
| UDT      | União Democrática Timorense (English: Timorese Democratic Union)   |
| USCCB    | United States Catholic Conference of Bishops   |
| VC       | <i>Vita Consecrata</i> Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II 2004   |

## Table of Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Acknowledgement .....  | ii  |
| Abbreviations .....  | iii |
| Table of Contents .....  | v   |
| Introduction .....   | 1   |
| Chapter I: History and Profile of Women Religious Congregations in the Philippines and in East Timor.....                              | 3   |
| A. Historical Overview: Philippines .....  | 3   |
| a. Locations of Sisters in the Philippines .....   | 8   |
| b. Growth and Expansion of Women Religious then and now .....  | 13  |
| B. Historical Overview: East Timor .....   | 19  |
| a. The Presence of the Catholic Church and the Participation of Congregation of the Canossian and Dominican Sisters in East Timor..... | 20  |
| b. The Mission of the Catholic Church in East Timor .....  | 23  |
| c. Growth and Expansion of Women Religious then and now .....  | 25  |
| Chapter II: Contemporary Challenges of Religious Women Congregations according to Universal Church Documents .....                     | 28  |
| A. Vita Consecrata.....  | 31  |
| a. The Challenge of consecrated Chastity .....   | 36  |
| b. The Challenge of voluntary Poverty.....   | 37  |
| c. The Challenge of Freedom to Obedience .....   | 39  |
| B. Ecclesiae in Asia .....   | 42  |
| Chapter III: Apostolate of Religious Women Congregations in contemporary Philippines and East Timor .....                              | 47  |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| A. Challenges for Religious Women Congregations in the Philippines.....   | 50 |
| B. Challenges for Religious Women Congregations in East Timor exemplified in the Mission of the Dominican Sisters ..... | 54 |
| a. The Mission of the Missionary Dominican Sisters of the Rosary .....  | 54 |
| b. History of the Opening of the Mission in East Timor .....  | 60 |
| Conclusion .....  | 65 |
| Bibliography .....  | 67 |
| A. Primary Source.....  | 67 |
| B. Secondary Literature .....   | 67 |
| C. Internet Resources.....  | 69 |
| D. Interviews .....   | 70 |

## Introduction

All Christians by virtue of their baptism are called to a life of discipleship and to be a missionary. All Christians are somehow involved in the missionary work of the Church by different roles such as in family life, as single, or religious consecrated life. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is the first disciple, a missionary and a model for all missionaries in following her son. In the time of Jesus, women were considered as second class and did not have much chance in participating in religious rituals in the Temple. However, Jesus always gives favor to women, for instance: women always accompany him in his mission, Jesus appears after his resurrection first to a woman, Mary Magdalene, and Jesus forgives the woman publicly who was caught in adultery. Christian faith and the Church contribute a lot to the proper education and liberation of women. The Second Vatican Council gave more chance to women concerning the work in the Church with an open mind including in women religious congregations.

In the beginning, the religious women Congregations were introduced by missionaries. Later on some of the local women could start local women congregations with many challenges such as financially, politically, and many others.

This thesis paper is divided into three parts. In the first chapter, the writer is going to discuss the history and profile of religious women congregations in the Philippines and in East Timor, follow by the challenges of women congregations according to church documents and in the third chapter the challenges of contemporary religious women regarding their apostolate work are the main focus.

The purpose of writing this research paper is to get a better understanding of the original root of the religious women congregations in the Philippines and in East Timor, which are the only dominantly Christian countries in Asia. Once Theodore Roosevelt says, "The more you know about the past, the better prepared you are for the future." As a future missionary of Dominican Sisters of the Rosary and to prepare for my further mission, the writer believes that this research will help for the future work as a missionary. This research paper can also serve as a reference for those who want to know more about the history of religious women congregations in the context of the Philippines and East Timor.

## **Chapter I: History and Profile of Women Religious Congregations in the Philippines and in East Timor**

This Chapter develops a framework for the study of the spirituality and the Congregational lives of women religious in the Philippines and in East Timor. From the 1930s to the early 1970s and up to today and set within the historical developments of women religious in the Catholic Church, the following study explains the developments of religious women in these two countries, while especially drawing on the experiences of women leaders in these religious congregations.

This first chapter looks at the leadership in the Philippines and East Timor and the subsequent reshaping of congregational principles in the context of the colonization regime following developments of the Second Vatican Council.

### **A. Historical Overview: Philippines**

The Philippines is a country, an archipelago formed by 7,107 islands in Southeast Asia, situated in the Western Pacific Ocean. During the recent visit of Pope Francis to that country, from January 15-19, 2015, the whole world could witness an outburst of faith and devotion of millions of Filipinos attending and participating in the different events in the presence of the Pope as the leader of 1.2 Billion Catholics. The mass media reporting on the visit have noticed that the Philippines is one of only two dominantly catholic countries in Asia, the other one being East Timor. The Philippines with a population of 100 million people, is one of the largest catholic countries in the world.

The evangelization of the Philippines started more than 450 years ago, with the arrival of the first missionaries following the incorporation of the islands into the Spanish

Empire in 1565.<sup>1</sup> The Spanish rule lasted from the sixteenth century until 1898, when, after a short lived first Philippine Republic, the country came under United States control as a consequence of the Philippine-American War. The Japanese occupation during World War II ended on 5 August 1945, after which the Philippines declared itself an independent country during the presidency of Manuel Roxas.<sup>2</sup>

The initial work of evangelization was carried out by religious orders, especially the Augustinians, starting from 1565, the Franciscan arrived in 1578, followed by the Jesuits in 1581. Dominican missionaries arrived in 1587, and also the Recollects. They became the source of religious congregations; they started their missions in different forms such as serve the people as pastors, as teachers, doctors and as leaders of villages. These religious orders had three different branches, which were also called “Orders”.<sup>3</sup> The monks or friars constituted the First Order, the nuns the Second order, and the affiliated laypersons, the Third Order. A so called Third Order can be constituted by three types of members: to the first type belonged secular members who lived together with their families; a second type of members lived by themselves like hermits, and a third type were called the “Beatas”<sup>4</sup> (blessed Women) who lived in a community called “Beaterios” and who wore habits and took simple vows. These “Beatas” were the first

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<sup>1</sup> Luciano P.R. Santiago, “To Love and To Suffer: The Development Of The Religious Congregations For Women In The Philippines During The Spanish Era (1565-1898),” *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society*, vol. 23, no, 2 (1995): 151-195, esp. 151.

<sup>2</sup> Bryan T. Froehle & Mary L. Gautier, *Global Catholicism: Portrait of a World Church* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 95.

<sup>3</sup> Santiago, “To Love and To Suffer,” 152-156.

<sup>4</sup> The “Beata” is a general term used in Portugal and Spain as well as colonial America to name a group of pious women who dedicate themselves to pious practices and visiting Churches. They are similar to the Beguines in Northern Africa. They are either living with their families or in a community and may be affiliated to a religious order as tertiaries. Such women also dedicated themselves to some form of apostolate and other social services. Many of these Beatas were later involved into becoming local religious congregations for women.

religious women present in the Philippines, who contributed in various ways to the growth and expansion of the Christian faith in this country.<sup>5</sup>

The scholar's interest in Nuns from the 1980s into the present was spurred by the highly visible and often-controversial positions women religious took in the wake of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>6</sup> In habit or in ordinary dress nuns throughout the Catholic world took advantage of the relaxation of rules that had previously circumscribed their lives, claiming greater responsibility and freedom as they involved themselves in social and political work well beyond the limits of schools, hospitals, and convents.<sup>7</sup> When the Second Vatican Council expresses in *Lumen Gentium* that the Catholic Church focuses her attention on the world of men and women, calling it as the theatre of human history, an ecclesiological shift happened.<sup>8</sup> Every Christian is called to perfection by the Lord, as it is written in *LG*: "The Lord Jesus, the divine Teacher and Model of all perfection, preached holiness of life to each and every one of his disciples of every condition of life."<sup>9</sup>

From the Church's earliest times on there were women and men who set out to follow Christ more freely and to imitate him more closely by practicing the evangelical counsels.<sup>10</sup> The Gospels portray women who Jesus accepted both as followers and as

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>6</sup> Coeli Barry, "Women Religious and Sociopolitical Change in the Philippines," 1930s-1970s," *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* 62, nos. 3-4 (2014): 377-397, here 378.

<sup>7</sup> Barry, "Women Religious and Sociopolitical Change in the Philippines", 378.

<sup>8</sup> Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa, "Philippine Catholicism and Secularization: Face-off, Denial or Dialogue?" *Asian Horizons*, vol. 7, no. 3, (2013): 547-567, esp. 547.

<sup>9</sup> Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (1964) no.40.

<sup>10</sup> Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on the up to date Renewal of Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis*, (1965), nos. 1.

apostolic companions (Luke 8:1-3).<sup>11</sup> Jesus encouraged women to listen and learn from him as disciples. The gospel of Matthew 19:3-12, may contain Jesus own vindication of his own celibate lifestyle, which also allowed and inspired both women and men to remain single for the sake of the Kingdom of God.<sup>12</sup> Being given the opportunity to live single for the sake of the Kingdom opened the door for women to assume roles in the Jesus movement (Church) other than traditional domestic ones. The Gospel tradition records that women were among the witnesses of Jesus' crucifixion, burial, empty tomb and resurrection.<sup>13</sup> Here we see the liberating effect the teaching and life of Jesus had on women and the loyalty with which they responded to this call to a new life. The religious women in history continue in this tradition to serve God's people and the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus Christ. The "Beatas," as already mentioned, are the first important group of Christian women giving witness for the Kingdom of God in such a way.

Before the years of turbulence there is a century of history of women religious in the Philippines-even longer if the few congregations established prior to the last quarter of the nineteenth century are taken into account.<sup>14</sup> From that time onwards the women were working as teachers and nurses, caring for instance for orphans and unwed mothers. They were first mainly Spanish and Filipina by birth, until the early 1900s when their

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<sup>11</sup>Ben Witherington, III, "Women (NT)," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols., ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6: 958.

<sup>12</sup> Witherington, III, "Women (NT)," 959.

<sup>13</sup> Witherington, III, "Women (NT)," 959.

<sup>14</sup> Barry, "Women Religious and Sociopolitical Change in the Philippines", 378.

number included Belgian, German, Irish, and French, American, as well as Philippine nationals.<sup>15</sup>

Religious women devoted themselves to the preservation of the Catholic faith where it had already taken root, and introduced it in new mission areas. These women traversed geographic, social, and national boundaries to live by their congregational rules and to instill the ideals of human virtue and Catholic womanhood into their charges.<sup>16</sup>

This dissertation traces changes in the perception and self-understanding of women religious in the Philippines from the 1930s through to the early 1970s until today, with a particular emphasis on the considerations around national identity. The compromises women made in the name of their religious community could be tolerated for a time; by the late 1960s, however, the political climate within the Philippines had shifted along with reforms in the global Catholic Church, which also changed the situation of women religious in the Philippines.<sup>17</sup>

During this period religious women were encouraged to make religious life more locally meaningful by promoting inculturation across various aspects of Catholicism as suggested by the reforms of Second Vatican Council. As a result national differences in the communities surfaced, causing strains inside of communities. Even the communities that were founded in the 1950s and which included only Philippine sisters, but operated with a great influence of European cultural practices inside the convents, were seen more

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<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 378.

<sup>16</sup> Barry, "Women Religious and Sociopolitical Change in the Philippines," 378.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 378

negatively or critically.<sup>18</sup> By highlighting narratives and congregational practices before the 1960s this theses draws attention not only to the issues of vocations (calls to religious life), but also to the social and cultural background within which the choices of women were made. The theses shows the construction of a new way by which women religious related to each other within and across communities, as well as with Filipinos outside the church, in the wake of the conciliar reforms that changed the old language/ideology of religious life.

#### **a. Locations of Sisters in the Philippines**

With the exception of a few orders of women religious, either founded in the colony or coming from Spain, those congregations came to the Philippines in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Hence there was only a minority of religious communities for women at the close of over three centuries of Spanish colonial rule. Some communities had secured a place on the edges of the religious landscape as cloistered nuns, living behind thick walls, hidden from the world. Others assumed the work typical of their fellow sisters in Europe: caring for the sick and educating young women, in this case the daughters of the newly developing elites.<sup>19</sup> Women congregations deal more with groups rather than with individuals.

According to Luciano P. R. Santiago it is a long saga of courageous struggles and commitments to their cause, with great sacrifices, human failures and unique accomplishments, which invested the Philippine nuns' moral authority and charisma in

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 378

<sup>19</sup> Barry, "Women Religious and Sociopolitical Change in the Philippines," 381-383.

this only Christian nation in Asia.<sup>20</sup> Behind their development was the creative force of Christian love and sacrifice. During the three centuries of Spanish rule in the Philippines, 14 religious congregations for women were formed. Nine of them were local foundations and five were foreign or international congregations. (One Japanese and four Spanish), which established an autonomous branch on the archipelago. Of the nine local communities almost all Beaterios were founded by native Filipinas, one by a Spanish sister and other four by a cooperation of Spanish and Filipino founders. Three of the five foreign congregations did not admit Filipinas and one local Beaterio did not accept Filipinas as full-fledged member.<sup>21</sup>

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a remarkable resurgence of contemplative and active congregations for women in the Catholic Church. A number of these new orders also arrived also in the Philippines towards the end of the Spanish rule. They are: The Daughters of Charity in 1862, The Augustinian Sisters of the Assumption in 1892, The Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in 1910, The Sisters of Saint Paul of Chartres in 1904, and the Benedictine Sisters in 1912.<sup>22</sup>In 1892 a school for women teachers was created under the direction of the Augustinian Religious of the Assumption, but this school lasted only a few years due to the revolution of 1896 and the ensuing Spanish-American War, which caused the sisters to leave for Spain.<sup>23</sup>Although the Spanish were forced to go out from the Philippines, the messages of faith and virtue were

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<sup>20</sup> Santiago, "To Love and To Suffer," 153-155

<sup>21</sup> Santiago, "To Love and To Suffer," 28.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.* 382.

core to the teaching of nuns who established schools and convents for the twentieth century.

A speech given in 1897 by the Directress the Superior Normal School, in Manila Sr. Maria de la Cruz, is revealing in its tone the detached acceptance about the likelihood that Spain might be forced to leave the Philippines and the inevitability of her own necessity to leave the country as well.

Who knows whether this war that is fast assuming national proportions will change the political status of your country? If that should happen, I shall be obliged to go. Bear in mind, therefore, that it is you who will take our place. Be ready to shoulder with your countrymen the new responsibilities you will have to face. [...] Stay together, unite and help each other in propagating the true Faith and the virtues essential to the advancement of your people. [...] Prepare yourselves to do all that is within your power to open up a new path that will lead to the happiness and glory of your race.<sup>24</sup>

Their history is one of courageous struggles, and commitment to their cause, magnificent sacrifices, but also of human weakness and failures. Their unique accomplishment highlights their charism and moral authority. Working in the background, in multiple activities and services, they played a crucial role in holding the Filipino Church together. We can say that their collective motto was “to love and to suffer,”<sup>25</sup> which describes in short the essence of their mission and history. The motivational force behind their development was indeed love and sacrifice. In seeking personal and group sanctification, they discovered that God manifests His love through the gifts of peace and joy, strength and healing. These women congregations helped in

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<sup>24</sup> Maria Carmen, “The Superior Normal Scholl for Women Teachers in Manila 1893-1898”, *Philippine Studies*, vol. 2, no.3 (1954): 227-28.

<sup>25</sup> Santiago, “To Love and To Suffer,” 151.

the different tasks of the parishes, and the barrio apostolate, but their main concern was related to catholic education and health care.<sup>26</sup>

The local Sisters were not only concerned with the evangelization in their own home country, but also with the missionary wish to go and work among other people. Two Filipino Sisters from the “Beaterio de Santa Catalina,”<sup>27</sup> were the first religious women to arrive on the Chinese mainland, in 1858. Before the end of that same year they founded the Asilo de la Santa Infancia (Asylum of the Holy Childhood) in Foochow, Fujian Province. They gathered together abandoned girls, cared for them, educated them in the Catholic faith, and eventually baptizing them. They saved more than 3,700 girls in a year. These Beatas established three more orphanages with schools in China before the end of the 19th century. In the early 20th century they opened six more asylums and five colleges for girls in China, Taiwan and Japan. This missionary zeal brought about also an increase in the number of vocations for the Beaterios in the Philippines and their missionary activity developed inside the country.<sup>28</sup>

According to the Catholic Directory 2013-2014 of the Philippines, there are currently 269 different religious female Congregations serving in the country. Their work, activities and missions are numerous, aside from parish pastoral work, education and health ministries they are involved in social work, youth programs, in the work with victims of domestic violence, human trafficking, prostitution, homelessness, and different

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<sup>26</sup> Bugnot et al., *Living Faith in God Series: Becoming a Community of Disciples III*, (Manila: Rex Book Store, 1998), 118.

<sup>27</sup> Santiago, “To Love and To Suffer,” 26.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

addictions. They clearly show to the poor and abandoned the care and love of our heavenly Father. When Pope Francis visited the Philippines in his first Mass, Pope Francis called on the Filipino flock to embrace the poor and to live simple lives of piety and to please the Lord. Pope asked his religious brothers and sisters to reject materialism and embrace a Christ-like poverty.<sup>29</sup> He said:

For us priests and consecrated persons, conversion to the newness of the Gospel entails a daily encounter with the Lord in prayer. For religious, living the newness of the Gospel also means finding ever anew in community life and community apostolates the incentive for an ever closer union with the Lord in perfect charity. For all of us, it means living lives that reflect the poverty of Christ, whose entire life was focused on doing the will of the Father and serving others...

Religious life must not only mean being confined in convents and monasteries, as is the case of contemplative congregations. Every active congregation has the opportunity and even Christian duty to help the people in need in line with their charism. A Christian life in service of God cannot be separated from the people, especially the poor and the needy. To serve God means to do everything for His sake, receiving his blessings for the missionary work. The best Sisters are always ready to suffer for God's kingdom. "It is not only the poor who need the church. It is the Church. It is the Church and religious congregations that need the poor in order to find new meaning and to become alive again."<sup>30</sup> Every nun or Sister receives a different but appropriate formation in her community depending on the congregation she belongs to and according to the specific Charism and task of this order.

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<sup>29</sup> Patricia Denise Chiu, "Pope Francis preaches love for the poor, life of piety in his first Mass in Philippines" GMA News January 16, 2015. <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/popefrancis/story/406511/pope-francis-preaches-love-for-the-poor-life-of-piety-in-his-first-mass-in-phl> Accessed on July 31, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> "Mabuhay Pope Francis," *World Mission*, vol. XXVII, no. 281, (January 2015), 21.

The Philippines have a big number of Religious men and women serving the people. But some dedicated their selves only to God, especially the cloistered nuns. The non-cloistered nuns are more in the schools, orphanages, hospitals and poor areas. Missionary life is not easy as a life of total dedication and service. Being a religious is not a bed of roses because it implies to be far away from loved ones and it requires many and great sacrifices. It is also not a life easy to understand for outsiders, since many people believe and think that men and women who consecrated their life to religious life, are like angels, or statues with no problems, with no weaknesses, difficulties, trials and challenges as for instance lay people are facing. Faith in God is what gives strength to missionaries. God called them to continue what Jesus did on earth, to witness and spread the good news in the whole World. “A new image of God involves, changing the way we believe, hope, trust, love, pray, confess, celebrate our faith and do mission.”<sup>31</sup> The spirituality of religious missionaries is to become open towards an authentic encounter with the people and to learn to love them as God loves them. Only sustaining love can heal the wounds, and end violence and terror in the world.

#### **b. Growth and Expansion of Women Religious then and now**

The end of the Second World War brought many changes to the church around the world. The Philippines Church experienced an expansion of its administrative structure all over the country, encouraged by the church and religious orders with an increase of the number of educational institutions in the provinces, which were now under independent bishoprics. After the war more centers for congregations were opened

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

in the Philippines to train and to respond to the needs of women's orders, especially new congregations that were established.<sup>32</sup>

This expansion meant that women from the provinces, who might not have had a chance to join the "international" Manila-based orders, could join the more numerous orders that were founded in the 1950s and 1960s, for which the training did not require going overseas.<sup>33</sup> During the 1950s the number of women joining congregations increased. According to the Catholic Directory of 1953, the number of Filipinas who were fully professed (excluding those still in training) was 1,490 sisters. By 1963 there were 3,606 Filipinas and 1,039 foreigners.<sup>34</sup> For more detailed information see Figure 1. Certainly the Catholic Church in the Philippines in the first and a half-decade after the independence served to embody this development. But there were those within the church who were impatient with the fact that so many positions of leadership were still held by foreigners.<sup>35</sup>

From the 1930s through the early 1970s, the religious women congregations in the country built educational and social welfare institutions.<sup>36</sup> As the country transformed from being colonized by the US to an independent nation, the nuns educated the young women and provided them with a good education. As Filipinas came to know vocational life through their own time in these schools, those who chose to enter religious life were

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<sup>32</sup> Barry, "Women Religious and Sociopolitical Change in the Philippines, 1930s-1970s". 62, nos. 3-4 (2014): 386-387

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 386-387.

<sup>34</sup> *Catholic Directory of the Philippines*. 1953. [Manila]: Catholic Trade School.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 389

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 395

taught to accommodate national differences. Adhering to practices inside of their communities, which derived from European Catholicism led by Europeans or North Americans, these women contributed to the growth and expansion of the church in the Philippines. However, the Second Vatican Council inspired directives on religious life that provided Philippine Sisters a vocabulary with which they tried to articulate a more enculturated and personally meaningful spirituality and vision.<sup>37</sup>

The Catholic Church convened the historic Second Vatican Council, in the early 1960s. Between 1962 and 1965, the council signaled openness to the modern, secular world which she had fought to keep at bay for the previous two centuries.<sup>38</sup> The wide – reaching changes that the Second Vatican Council ushered in touched upon every aspect of Catholicism and affected the lives of Catholics throughout the world.<sup>39</sup> As the Catholic Church sanctioned the vernacularization of the liturgy and rituals and encouraged priests and nuns to work more closely with the poor – not simply for them in the conventional charity – based understanding of that relationship – nuns in the Philippines reassessed their lives as members of their congregations.<sup>40</sup> The reforms of the Second Vatican Council came to the Philippines in a climate of radical nationalism and student activism, a fact that added to the impact of the historic changes in Catholicism.<sup>41</sup>

The conciliar document Decree on Religious Renewal, which guided nuns in their initial efforts to redefine themselves as religious, begins by advocating:

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<sup>37</sup> Barry, “Women Religious and Sociopolitical Change in the Philippines, 1930s-1970s”, 395

<sup>38</sup> Barry, “Women Religious and Sociopolitical Change in the Philippines, 1930s-1970s”, 388.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 389.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 389

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 389

The manner of living, praying, and working should be suitably adapted everywhere, especially in missionary territories, to the modern physical and psychological circumstances of the members and also, as required by the nature of each institute, to the necessities of the apostolate, the demands of culture, and social and economic circumstances. (Second Vatican Council 1965)<sup>42</sup>

Congregations could modify the standards of their congregation by being faithful to their identity. They began to be divided between those who remained in classrooms and those who went to work in the expanded “social action” networks. Competing political outlooks guided the ways in which the Sisters articulated their faith. To date religious women congregations in the Philippines have come to life in the scholarly and popular imagination after they moved more directly into social activities during the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos.<sup>43</sup>

Consequently the decades leading up to the late 1960s and beyond have been often treated as being merely a backdrop. By contrast, this theses lays the framework for a more historically grounded and nuanced approach to the study of women religious, and in so doing it brings into sharp relief the differences between pre-and post-Second Vatican Council Catholic thought and practice regarding women religious in the Philippines. When studying the lives of women who chose to live in vows, the Catholic community provides a prism through which prevailing ideals of womanhood can be appreciated. Looking closely at how they embraced a way of life that rejected somehow “the world” and the conventional paths to marriage and motherhood, enables us to

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<sup>42</sup> Second Vatican Council, Decree on the renewal of religious life, *Perfectae Caritatis*.(1965), 3.

<sup>43</sup> Barry, “Women Religious and Sociopolitical Change in the Philippines, 1930s-1970s”, 396

appreciate the social, cultural as well as the spiritual values and norms that defined the new developments in the society and the Church.<sup>44</sup>

More research on the histories of women religious will deepen our understanding of their place in the religious and society all and scape. There are around 269 Religious congregations for women working in the Philippines, local and foreign foundations. There are 7, 908 sisters, in 2015, included those who work outside of the country, 10 % of whom are foreigners, and 506 candidates are in the novitiate stage.<sup>45</sup>

| Year | Women Religious |
|------|-----------------|
| 1950 | 1,230           |
| 1953 | 1,490           |
| 1963 | 3,606           |
| 1970 | 3,315           |
| 1980 | 3,149           |
| 1990 | 4,807           |
| 1999 | 4,928           |
| 2000 | 5,803           |
| 2001 | 5,463           |
| 2002 | 4,156           |
| 2003 | 3, 710          |
| 2004 | 4,730           |

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<sup>44</sup> Barry, “Women Religious and Sociopolitical Change in the Philippines, 1930s-1970s”, 387.

<sup>45</sup> Claretian Publications, <http://www.claretianpublications.com/women-religious>

|      |       |
|------|-------|
| 2013 | 5,899 |
| 2015 | 7,908 |

Figure 1: Number of Women Religious in the Philippines <http://www.claretianpublications.com/women-religious>

In the year 2003 the number of women religious dropped, due to the crisis that affects them until today; namely the “loss of relevance” and in a world that has become a “global village” and the “loss of power” in a church that has become a “world Church”.<sup>46</sup> This drop happened mainly because of social and economic reasons. Many families do not encourage their daughters to explore their vocation because they need them to help earn income for the family.<sup>47</sup> Many youth of today no longer have the generosity and idealism required for religious life. The perception that the religious life is no longer a meaningful life option, the reluctance or unwillingness of the youth of today to make a lifelong commitment, reveals the apparent lack of relevance of Religious Life today.

According to Cardinal Tagle, between 2008 and 2012, the congregations, which, Tagle has been dealing with, administrated 11, 805 dispensations, releasing women and men from their religious vows, requiring from clergy also dispensation from the Vatican. The average number of religious in perpetual vows leaving their order reached about

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<sup>46</sup> Antonio Pernia, “Powerless servants of Humanity, humble Witnesses of the Kingdom: The state of the Consecrated Life Today,” *Religious Life Asia* (Quezon City, Philippines, 2015), 6.

<sup>47</sup> N.J. Viehland, “Cardinal Tagle in latest appointment could help revive religious life,” <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/cardinal-tagle-latest-appointment-could-help-revive-religious-life> accessed July 21, 2015.

3,000 on average every year. The reasons for leaving were not revealed, and should be further investigated.<sup>48</sup>

## B. Historical Overview: East Timor

The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste is a nation in Southeast Asia. It comprises the eastern half of the island of Timor, the nearby islands of Atauro and Jaco, and Oecusse, an exclave on the northwestern side of the island, within Indonesia West Timor (see Figure 2). It is divided administratively into thirteen districts. East Timor has the second smallest population of any other country in Southeast Asia with a total of 1,212,107 people. It is considered to be one of the world's poorest countries.<sup>49</sup>



Figure 2: East Timor Map (www.google.com)

<sup>48</sup>Viehland, “Cardinal Tagle in latest appointment could help revive religious life,” <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/cardinal-tagle-latest-appointment-could-help-revive-religious-life> accessed July 21, 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Michael G. Smith with Morren Dee, *Peacekeeping In East Timor: The Path to Independence* (Boulder Colorado, USA: Lynne Rienner, 2003), 33

East Timor has a culture steeped deep in tradition, rituals and mysticism. Traditionally, the inhabitants of the island practice animism, a belief system revolving around the sacred elements of the natural world, which regulate behavior, ceremony (such as birth, contractual alliances, marriages and burial). Later in the sixteenth century, when the Dutch and Portuguese arrived, the proximity of Timor to major trade routes and its abundance of sandalwood led these two colonial powers to divide the island into east and west.<sup>50</sup> Portuguese missionaries later arrived on the island to spread the Catholic faith. The Timorese population is today largely Catholic but an adherence to animist forms of religious traditions still remains.<sup>51</sup> By 1780 Portuguese Timor was home to fifty churches, and during this time the Dominican and Jesuit missionaries often served as instruments of both the Church and the Country.<sup>52</sup> The way to solve the problems encountered was to work together, as Government, the Church and the Religious Missionaries, to find appropriate solutions for the people.

**a. The Presence of the Catholic Church and the Participation of Congregation of the Canossian and Dominican Sisters in East Timor**

This subchapter highlights some aspects of the role of the Catholic Church in East Timor, since it exercised a very important influence on the Timorese society, being an active institution that participates fully in evangelization, emancipation and progress in the country since colonial times.

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 33

<sup>51</sup> Bryan T. Froehle & Mary L. Gautier, *Global Catholicism: Portrait of a World Church* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 96.

<sup>52</sup> Alynna J. Lyon, “*The Activist Catholic Church in Independent East Timor: The Church is not a Political Institution.*” [http://www.wiscnetwork.org/porto2011/papers/WISC\\_2011-721.pdf](http://www.wiscnetwork.org/porto2011/papers/WISC_2011-721.pdf) Accessed July 17, 2015.

To date the performance of the Catholic Church on the island remains strong in comparison to her influence in other countries. Her commitment was always aimed at those who suffer and are vulnerable. Her long-term commitment spans the time of the Portuguese colonization, pervades the times of the Indonesian invasion and is maintained in today's society of East Timor.<sup>53</sup> Her actions promoted actively the education of the Timorese citizen and the development of the whole country, especially through formation, health care, communication, and agriculture. The Church helped to address the structural causes of poverty, promoted development and was questioning any political and economic orientation contrary to the promotion of social justice and the values of the Gospel.<sup>54</sup>

The congregation of the Canossian Sisters is now present in East Timor for 133 years. Their mission continues to be promote the personal human dignity through integral formation of the youth. The activities of the congregation are especially directed towards the neediest people, both in the physical and spiritual sense.<sup>55</sup> The initiative to start in East Timor came from the vicar general and superior of the missions of the Timor district, Father Antonio Joaquim de Medeiros, and from Msgr. Manuel Bernardo de Sousa Enes, Bishop of Macau. Both asked the mother superior of the Canossian Daughters of Charity in Hong Kong to open their congregation for work in East Timor with the aim to educate

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<sup>53</sup> Ervinia Martins Brito, "A Proposta Educacional Da Congregação Canossiana para Educação em Timor Leste" (MA. Dissertação, Universidade de São Paulo, 2012), 53.

<sup>54</sup> Lawrence C. Reardon, and Clyde Wilcox, *The Catholic Church and the Nation-State: Comparative Perspectives Religion & Politics* (Washington, DC Georgetown University Press, 2006), 138.

<sup>55</sup> Brito, "A Proposta Educacional Da Congregação Canossiana para Educação em Timor Leste." 58.

the Timorese female youth.<sup>56</sup> The Canossian Sisters accepted this invitation and arrived in East Timor on November 9, 1879, being the first religious women congregations reaching this islands, with the second being the Missionary Dominican Sisters of the Rosary on June 25, 1953.<sup>57</sup> About the mission of the Dominican Sisters in East Timor the writer shall focus in chapter III.

On March 7, 1880 the Canossian Sisters began their operations in East Timor, establishing an internal college for girls in Dili. In additions, they began to teach in three public schools. In their mission the Canossian Sisters responded to the call of providing a better life for women, for which goal education is crucial. Their method of formation has always been consisted of two important dimension: on the one side the formal education with a school, religious and cultural formation; the other dimension covers non-formal education, including the empowerment of women for domestic tasks, enabling for cleaning work, sewing, embroidery and weaving. Therefore, in the convents of the sisters in East Timor, since colonial times, there were commonly dormitories available for students. With the expansion of their mission to other areas, even more schools were opened.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo, *História da Igreja em Timor –Leste: 450 anos de Evangelização (1562-2012)* primeiro volume 1562- 1940. (Porto, Portugal, Sersilito-Empresa Gráfica, 2013). 353.

<sup>57</sup>Timor Português Province of “San Luis Beltrán”, 1953.

<sup>58</sup> Ximenes Belo, *História da Igreja em Timor–Leste: 450 anos de Evangelização*, 355.

## **b. The Mission of the Catholic Church in East Timor**

Since the sixteenth century, the Catholic Church operates in East Timor in evangelization. It started its activities with missionaries who introduced in that country this new holy religion and the new dimensions of Christian values. At first in 1556, Friar Antonio Taveira, a Dominican, baptized about five thousand people.<sup>59</sup> The missionaries of the Catholic Church, during this epoch of European expansionism especially in countries such as Portugal, were also intermediaries regarding political security and the administration of the colonies. In the case of East Timor one Portuguese government's policy strategy for the missionaries, was seeking to convert local people.<sup>60</sup>

The evolution of the administration of the Catholic Church involves two important aspects: on the one side the political and administrative side with the submission to the Portuguese's leadership, and on the other, the Faith development and manifestation followed by an increase of the number of the faithful. Although the island was visited by trading people from China and India since the beginning of the sixteenth century, who brought religions influences such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, Catholicism grew and maintained its predominance in East Timor, especially during the invasion of Indonesia.<sup>61</sup> The scope of the mission of the Catholic Church was first to evangelize, which means the focus and attention on religious formation and to assist in the formation of the Timorese clergy.

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<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>60</sup> Brito, "A Proposta Educacional Da Congregação Canossiana para Educação em Timor Leste," 57.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 60.

Currently, to the Catholic Church belong 98% of the population, showing with clear evidence that the Catholic faith is an important factor in the constitution and sustenance of the identity of the people and also the preservation of its historical aspects. During the twenty-four years of Indonesian dominance, the Catholic Church strengthened its formation principle of quality of life and strengthening the Timorese identity, by keeping the language Tetum<sup>62</sup> as the national language and preserving the specific Timorese values which evolved in a period of four centuries in the context of Christian life.<sup>63</sup>

The church today insists on her function of evangelizing and educating, following the Social Doctrine as expressed in the following documents: *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII (1891), *Mater et Magistra* of John XXIII (1961), the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* of John XXIII (1963), *Populorum Progressio* Paul VI (1967); and *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, of John Paul II (1987), *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) by Pope Benedict and *Laudato Si*

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<sup>62</sup> In the fifteenth century, before the arrival of the Portuguese, Tetum had spread through central and eastern Timor as a contact language under the aegis of the Belunese-speaking Kingdom of Wehali, at that time the most powerful kingdom in the island. The Portuguese (present in Timor from c. 1556) made most of their settlements in the west, where Dawan was spoken, and it was not until 1769, when the capital was moved from Lifau (Oecusse) to Dili that they began to promote Tetum as an inter-regional language in their colony. Timor was one of the few Portuguese colonies where a local language, and not a form of Portuguese, became the lingua franca: this is because Portuguese rule was indirect rather than direct, the Europeans governing through local kings who embraced Catholicism and became vassals of the King of Portugal. *Tetun-Prasa* is the form of Tetum that is spoken throughout East Timor. Although Portuguese was the official language of Portuguese Timor until 1975, *Tetun-Prasa* has always been the predominant *lingua franca* in the eastern part of the island. When Indonesia occupied East Timor between 1975 and 1999, declaring it "the Republic's 27th Province", the use of Portuguese was banned, and Indonesian was declared the sole official language, but the Roman Catholic Church adopted Tetum as its liturgical language, making it a focus for cultural and national identity. When East Timor gained its independence on 20 May 2002, Tetum and Portuguese were declared as official languages.

Cited from Encyclopedia <http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Tetum.aspx> and Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tetum\\_language](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tetum_language)

<sup>63</sup> Brito, "A Proposta Educacional Da Congregação Canossiana para Educação em Timor Leste". 55.

(2015) by Pope Francis. And many other Church documents, which deal with cultural and social questions, among them also the numerous radio messages of Pius XII.

Today the mission of the Catholic Church exists in three dioceses with the liturgical language being Tetum. The Catechesis operates still very traditionally and consists of memorizing prayers, and answering catechetical questions.<sup>64</sup>

### **c. Growth and Expansion of Women Religious then and now**

The invasion of Indonesia on December 7, 1975 caused many Timorese women to struggle for liberation from the Indonesian rule.<sup>65</sup> They explored how the participation in this struggle has empowered them and set them also on a path towards greater equality with men. This study examines the challenges that lie ahead for women as they work today together to consolidate the achievements of a newly independent nation.

Throughout the Indonesian invasion most of the women congregations' expanded in East Timor, and many women joined religious orders to avoid rape or abductions. Other young women and girls married quickly, to avoid being forced to 'marry' Indonesian soldiers.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Brito, "A Proposta Educacional Da Congregação Canossiana para Educação em Timor Leste". 54.

<sup>65</sup> Deborah Cummins, *Local Governance in Timor-Leste: Lessons in Postcolonial State-building Volume 69 of Routledge Contemporary Southeast Asia Series* (Milton Park, Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 29.

<sup>66</sup> Irena Cristalis, Catherine Scott and Ximena Andrade, *Independent Women: The Story of Women's Activism in East Timor* (London: Catholic Institute, 2005), 1-38.

Many of the members of the Canossian Sisters, and foreign priests and nuns in particular, fled the country when the civil war between the Fretilin and the UDT,<sup>67</sup> broke out, but a significant minority, including some foreign missionaries, stayed on. They saw their special mission in remaining close to the people, come what may. Their status as members of religious orders initially provided a measure of protection. The other Religious orders returned after the bloodiest years of the resistance war and by the early 1980s Indonesian orders were encouraged to repopulate East Timor's convents and presbyteries.<sup>68</sup> From that time on many religious women congregations were established in East Timor, therefore, many young girls were joining them as well as others left the congregations.

Figure 2 gives in a simple table that give us the numbers of women religious in the respective year. Due to the limited sources the writer can only provide information till 2013.

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<sup>67</sup> UDT means The Timorese Democratic Union (in Portuguese means *União Democrática Timorense*) which is a conservative political party in East Timor. It was the first party to be established in the country in 1974. Fretilin means The Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Portuguese: *Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente*) a left its political party in East Timor. They presently hold a number of seats in the National Parliament and form the government in East Timor from the independence until 2007. The party began as a resistance movement that fought for the independence of East Timor, first from Portugal and then from Indonesia, between 1974 and 1998. It was originally called the Timorese Social Democratic Association (ASDT). After East Timor gained its independence from Indonesia, FRETILIN became one of several parties competing for power in a multi-party system. Cited from Wikipedia.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolutionary\\_Front\\_for\\_an\\_Independent\\_East\\_Timor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolutionary_Front_for_an_Independent_East_Timor) See also, Heike Krieger, Dietrich Rauschnig (eds), *East Timor and the International Community: Basic Documents*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). 70-71.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 38-39.

| Year | Women Religious |
|------|-----------------|
| 1949 | 30              |
| 1970 | 60              |
| 1980 | 90              |
| 1990 | 120             |
| 1998 | 254             |
| 2001 | 303             |
| 2002 | 443             |
| 2006 | 679             |
| 2010 | 562             |
| 2013 | 441             |

*Figure 3 Number of Women Religious in East Timor<sup>69</sup>*

According to the information available to the writer, the total number of women congregations in East Timor is about 80. All have their different charism, but their goal is the same, like caring for disabled and orphaned children from central and rural parts of East Timor. Still Indonesian and Timorese Sisters work together to care and educate children in need, whose families no longer can support and take care of them. The nuns are trying to develop more schools and improve facilities so that the children can experience a brighter future in this country still rocked by extreme poverty.

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<sup>69</sup> Data personally collected from East Timor Women Congregations

## Chapter II: Contemporary Challenges of Religious Women Congregations according to Universal Church Documents

A number of Church documents of the past few decades and their orientations have greatly affected religious women. By underlining the common mission received by all Christians at baptism, *Lumen Gentium* opened the door for deeper women participation in the life of the Church. The mutuality of the mission implies co-responsibility between men and women, lay and consecrated person, clergy and the hierarchy. Further, *Gaudium et Spes* adds another dimension to the understanding of the Church's mission. By pushing a positive view of the world, *Gaudium et Spes* reversed the Church's centuries-old stance of separation from the world. It spoke of mutual relations between the Church and the world and encourages a genuine dialogue between them,<sup>70</sup>(GS 40).

Other ecclesial declaration are even clearer in their statement about religious women. *Vita Consecrata* contains by far some of the most significant affirmations on consecrated women ever made by a pope. VC no. 58 and *Evangelium Vitae* 99, urges the promotion of “a ***new feminism*** that rejects the temptation of imitating models of male domination in order to ... overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation”. And *Pacem in Terris* 41 had earlier identified the aspirations of women as one of the “signs of the times.” *Mulieris Dignitatem* affirms the dignity and role of women today.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, (1965), nos. 44.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Sister Julma Neo, “Consecrated Women in the Church and in Society: The role of Consecrated Women in the Church and in Society today”, <http://cmglobal.org/vincentiana/cgi-bin/library.cgi?e=d-00000-00---off-0vincenti--00-0---0-10-0---0---0direct-10---4-----dtx--0-11--11-en-50---20-about-compassion--00-0-1-00-0-0-11-1-0utfZz-8-00&cl=search&d=HASHb3c25696e563ce4c60ac19&x=1> Accessed on July 22, 2015.

Moreover, there are other similar references in documents issued by various Synods of Bishops and major religious superiors on the continental level. Those documents frequently discuss the development of consecrated women in religious life. *Vita Consecrata* and *Ecclesia in Asia* make clear that all men and women religious, who consecrate their life, are to get appropriate formation and training, but most especially the women religious. These two documents emphasize that the Church is very much concerned with the formation of people in consecrated life, meanwhile formation can prepare them to reflect on the life, mind and heart of Jesus in any kind of circumstances they encounter. Therefore, the Church stresses that the formation of consecrated people should be all-round, systematic and life-long, (*Vita Consecrata*, no.65-71).<sup>72</sup> The Synodal Fathers also judge the wider participation of women in the life and mission of the Church in Asia to be of especially pressing need,<sup>73</sup> (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 44, 45). In this way consecrated life can be a powerful witness in today's world particularly in Asia. Due to the historical and social situation in Asia, the formation of consecrated persons has its own unique challenges and needs.

Challenges, which consecrated persons in today's world are mainly facing is an increasingly globalized world, social change, secularization, overwhelming poverty, cultural and religious pluralism, migration, environmental pollution and degradation. Hence, it is extremely difficult to make accurate observation which are applicable

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<sup>72</sup> John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata* Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II, (Pasay City, Philippines: Paulines, 2004), 102-112.

<sup>73</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II*, (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999), 44-45.

everywhere. A religious who has his or her own vocation and motivation to live for God is always coping with challenges in living out ones commitment.<sup>74</sup>

In the globalized world, for instance, communication today looks increasingly likely to claim not simply to represent reality, but to control it. This has in some way contributed to the shallowness of life of religious women. There is an obsession for creating a good image in the public rather than focusing on living a faithful life. The pastoral instruction on social communication rightly points out “reality for many, is what the media recognize as real; what it does not acknowledge seems of little importance” (cf. *Aetatis Novae*, 4). There is need for a critical use of the social media. The Church has as a considerably positive, sympathetic and encouraging approach to the means of social communication, and the Church considers them as gift of God and true sign of the times. But several changes related to new social media have been for the better but many others have been for the worse. There is the need of wisdom and the spirit of discernment in using social media

The writer will now deal with the two documents *VC* and *EA* in more detail, especially regarding their message and relevance for women religious in Asia.

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<sup>74</sup> Nobin Narzary, “Challenges to Religious Life: Philosophical Reflections from an ethical perspective” <http://nobinnarzary.blogspot.com/2012/01/challenges-to-religious-life-from.html> Accessed July 21, 2015.

## A. Vita Consecrata

Generally Consecrated life is a gift of God the Father. By the profession of the evangelical counsels, the most characteristic traits of the life of Jesus, the chaste, poor and obedient one (cf. Matthew 8:20; Phil. 2:8), and the unfathomable riches of his ministry and mystery (cf. Eph. 3:8), the nearness of the Kingdom of God is proclaimed by witnessing the presence of the Lord in our World.<sup>75</sup> By practicing the vows, religious life becomes a living icon, a parable of Jesus life: to be chaste, poor and obedient.<sup>76</sup> People, who consecrate their life, have a commitment to serve God and the other. The person who is concerned for God and others people needs to be properly trained and guided. The Consecrated person testifies that the *chastity* of their hearts, bodies, lives, is the full and strong expression of a total love for God that renders a person free, full of deep joy and ready for mission.<sup>77</sup>

In the post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, Pope John Paul II explains the concept of chastity as, “the pure love which consecrated persons draw from the contemplation of the Trinitarian love revealed to us in Christ. Consecrated chastity is a joyful and liberating experience.”<sup>78</sup> Certainly, religious men and women, as witnesses of such a love, and life are important for the people in Asia today

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<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>76</sup> Quirico Pedregosa, “Living out Mysticism and Prophecy in Asia Today,” vol. XVI, no.1, *Towards an Integral Vision for the Future of Religious Life: New Insights on the Mystical and Prophetic elements* (Quezon City, Philippines: Institute for Consecrated Life in Asia, 2014), 99.

<sup>77</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education, *Consecrated Persons and their Mission in Schools*, (Pasay City, Philippines: Paulines, 2003), 24.

<sup>78</sup> John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 88.

As the study mentioned already the formation for religious life has its own unique challenges and needs. Formation for the consecrated life is not only to attain or gain knowledge or studying a theology course, but consecrated life is more than that: it is a specific Christian way of life. For Quirico Pedregosa, religious life within the religious traditions in Asia is primarily a way of life, not just a set of obligations to follow.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, the eventual challenges of Christian religious life in Asia is to become an authentic way of life in the service of God's reign, to live prophetically within a certain social, economic, political, cultural and religious context. Furthermore, the most important basis in the formation for religious life is the meaning, the focus, and the direction of this way of life. In addition, knowledge, life experiences and role models are essentials to support their teaching.

The present situation in Asia makes it difficult for sisters to apply their knowledge and what they have learned to their everyday life, causing a conflict between their knowledge and their real life situation. For instance, when someone is talking about the relevance of community life for consecrated persons, we know that a religious community is evangelical by nature as it bears witness to the kingdom of God. However, often in reality, because of pastoral needs, financial and/or personnel reasons, most often only one or two sisters live in a parish. And the Sisters may not even have the chance to get together as community.

The Church recognizes the contributions which the Sisters give to the society, with their different skills, their sensitivity and intuition. Many Sisters share pastoral responsibilities, help people, guide families, groups and offer new contributions to

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<sup>79</sup> Pedregosa, "Living out Mysticism and Prophecy in Asia Today", 98.

theological reflection. According to Father Diarmuid O’Murchu, MSC, modern apostolic Congregations tend to prioritize ministries related to teaching, health care, social work, retreat ministry and parochial service.<sup>80</sup> Most of the Religious women are formed and trained with those skills, and are considered to be most suitable to serve the Church in Asia. When Pope Francis delivered his homily on the World Day for Consecrated Life, he said that the Sisters and Nuns are great women, “They are a gift, the leaven that carries the message of Christ. These women are great”<sup>81</sup> Again Pope Francis highlighted the great value that Sisters or Nuns bring to the Church. He said "What would happen if there were no Sisters or Nuns? No Sisters or Nuns in hospitals, in missions, in charitable institutions, in schools... Can you even imagine a Church without Nuns...? No it is unthinkable!"<sup>82</sup> Religious Women consecrated their life to God in the service to the people of God, in every situation of their life. Women are focused on their mission and are reflecting the call of God, to live a peaceful and fulfilled life, tending to the needs of others and also to be good servants to the Father above all things in life.

To accomplish this mission religious women are called to give their singular and communitarian witness in a prophetic way.<sup>83</sup> As discussed in the first chapter on the

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<sup>80</sup> Diarmuid O’Murchu, “*Religious Life Witness in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Mystical-Prophetic Horizons*”, vol. XVI, no.1, “*Towards an Integral Vision for the Future of Religious Life: New Insights on the Mystical and Prophetic elements*” (Quezon City, Philippines: Institute for Consecrated Life in Asia, 2014), 79.

<sup>81</sup>“Francis: Church without Nuns ‘Unimaginable’” *National Catholic Reporter*.<http://ncronline.org/blogs/francis-chronicles/francis-church-without-nuns-unimaginable>. Accessed July 17, 2015.

<sup>82</sup> NCR staff, “Francis: Church without Nuns ‘Unimaginable’ | *National Catholic Reporter*.”<http://ncronline.org/blogs/francis-chronicles/francis-church-without-nuns-unimaginable>. Accessed July 17, 2015.

<sup>83</sup>Cardinal Eduardo Pironio, Archbishop Augustine Mayer, “Religious and Human Promotion” Plenaria of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, 25-28 April 1978, (Vatican City, 12 August 1980), 3-9.

history of women religious congregations in the earlier time, they faced particular problems and difficulties when they tried to intervene in areas of great injustice and oppression. Religious Women were bound to face difficult challenges in their manner of presence and in their apostolic works. There are various challenges religious life is facing today. One of them is the decrease of the number of people in religious life and vows.

The three major challenges of Consecrated life addressed to the Church herself, are the same as ever, posed only in new ways, and perhaps more radically in our contemporary society. These challenges relate directly to the evangelical counsels of obedience, chastity and poverty, impelling the Church, and particularly consecrated person, to clarify and testify to the profound anthropological and religious significance of these counsels.<sup>84</sup> These evangelical counsels are a sacred promise made publicly with the approval of the Church. Through these vows a religious women responds with her whole life to God and to love Him completely without reserve. As the United States Catholic Conference of Bishop (USCCB), expresses:

All Christians are called to live the virtues of chastity, poverty and obedience; these vows provide for a purification of heart and spiritual freedom that uniquely mark the life of the consecrated women religious. Living these vows enables them to focus their entire being on God and his people. All women religious profess this three vows Obedience, Chastity and Poverty. The vows of consecrated life are means by which the women religious seeks to be more closely to the one they love. Living these vows draws them into the Paschal Mystery of Jesus. They embrace a transforming love who gives meaning to all suffering and sacrifice.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, no. 87-88. P.138.

<sup>85</sup> “*The Vowed Life*”, United States Conference of Catholic Bishop (USCCB), <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/discerning-women/the-vowed-life.cfm> accessed on July 25, 2015.

To find meaning in suffering and to give meaning to suffering is a specific Christian understanding and practice an important contribution in the Asian context. Suffering is understood differently in Buddhism, which is the way to overcome suffering. “Both regard [suffering] as an evil but in Christianity, the evil has a salvific purpose, but for Buddhism, suffering is regarded as the result of ignorance and craving, an enlightened one does not suffer. The French poet, Paul Claudel, said: ‘Jesus did not come to explain suffering, nor to take it away; he came to fill it with his presence.’”<sup>86</sup>In other words Jesus’s purpose was to enter into suffering in order to be with us and to draw us to himself and to give suffering the deepest meaning. Religious women caring for the poor in Asia give a new meaning to suffering and a specific dignity to every suffering being.

The vows always have a paramount importance in the life of the religious woman. Due to the renewal of religious life fostered by the Vatican Council, religious vows have been brought out from a rather formula bound understanding to acquire a deeper and more relational meaning. Let us see what *VC* says about some important aspects of religious life as expressed through the vows.

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<sup>86</sup> Stratford Caldecott, *Catholicism & other Religions: Introducing Interfaith Dialogue* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2009), 31.

### a. The Challenge of consecrated Chastity

VC explains the concept of chastity as “the pure love which consecrated person draw from the contemplation of the Trinitarian love revealed to us in Christ. Consecrated chastity is a joyful and liberating experience”.<sup>87</sup> Today we see that a *hedonistic culture* separates sexuality from all objective moral norms, often treat it as a mere diversion and a consumer good and, together with the complicity of the means of social communication, justifying a kind of idolatry of the sexual instinct. The consequences of this are before everyone’s eyes: transgressions of every kind, sexual abuse and exploitation, abortion, with resulting psychic and moral suffering on the part of individuals and families.<sup>88</sup>

As we look at the reality in the globalized world nowadays, there are so many technologies that affect people. This has brought also a big challenge for the religious people, especially for those in celibate lives. Many are tempted by those technologies and therefore, they lose contact with what they supposed to be and fail to live their vows. For instance, there is a crisis within the religious life regarding sexuality, leading even to sexual abuse. Some nuns or priests are no longer faithful to her/his vow of chastity. Cases of infidelity to the celibate and chaste life have shocked the Church in recent time.

The view on religious life today has reached such a bad state which can make people untouched by it as the people do not always see in a religious women a credible witness of Jesus and his radical commitment to the Reign of God.

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<sup>87</sup> John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, no. 88-89.

<sup>88</sup> John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, no. 87-88.

The word witness is a key to Religious life in Asia today. Witness becomes powerful when religious women open themselves to a radical conversion to live the evangelical counsels with visibility and credibility among the people, understanding and witnessing the meaning of a thirst for God, a life that dares to renounce and risks all in search of the divine and his justice, especially in the service of those most in need.

### **b. The Challenge of voluntary Poverty**

Poverty is not just the absence of things needed for life. From the Christian point of view, poverty as a lack of things needed, is an evil. God has given us the world with plenty of resources to be shared by everybody. Humans are empowered even to exercise responsible dominion over creation as children of God. In the present situation the actual distribution of resources and wealth in societies has deprived a large number of people even the basic essentials of life which is the greatest sin in History.

By the vow of poverty religious women are countering such a devastating mentality by living a simple life. They commit themselves to share their resources and their time within one another in communities and with those in need. In other words a vowed person in a religious community does not have personal possessions, like the early Christians they “place all things in common” (Acts 2:44). Today a vow of poverty is even more than that, and a truly prophetic sign in today’s societies where individualism and consumerism is the norm, and where there are so huge gaps between rich and poor locally

and globally.<sup>89</sup> In this regard we have to mention another challenge today and this is materialism. People want to possess, heedless of their real needs and the needs and suffering of the weakest, by lacking any balance and just distribution of natural resources. Consecrated life is constituted with the profession of evangelical poverty, which can be lived in different ways and is often expressed in an active involvement in the promotion of solidarity and charity.<sup>90</sup>

The demands of poverty in religious life flow from the cry of the poor and from a total sincere openness to God who overwhelms us with the gifts of his creation. In other words, the demands of poverty flow from a true contemplation of the Kingdom, which takes a practical shape in our lives. According to the FABC: “In Asia, millions of people still suffer from great poverty. The victims of deprivation, dispossession, humiliation, exclusion and oppression who struggle for dignity, freedom and solidarity and a life worthy of their humanity, are privileged resources for theology.” (FABC papers no. 96).<sup>91</sup> The identity and significance of the apostolic consecrated life today must be seen in the above context. To conclude this part of the study I want to share a reflection of Sister Mary Sujita Kallapurakkathu, SND, below:

Most religious congregations, especially those which are international in their origin, will have to make a conscious effort to free themselves from their perceived identity as “foreigners” with foreign financial resources and higher and better lifestyle, as professionals who run big institutions and are a “special” class in themselves! I wonder if instead of being a transforming presence in Asia, some of us are losing our mystical and prophetic “sting” by becoming increasingly co-opted by a consumerist culture, reinforcing a secular and comfortable lifestyle!

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<sup>89</sup>“*Religious Vows: Committing to life and Love,*”  
[http://vocations.ca/types\\_of\\_vocations/religious\\_vows/](http://vocations.ca/types_of_vocations/religious_vows/)

<sup>90</sup> John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, no. 89. P. 140.

<sup>91</sup> Sr. Julma C.Neo, DC “The Witness of Consecrated Life in Asia Today,” (FABC Paper No. 92b),

At times our religious membership can make us feel entitled to a more comfortable and secure life because we convince ourselves that we have left all things to follow Jesus and He has promised us a special hundredfold return! Being religious in Asia can be seen as a way of upward socio-economic mobility. The way we live our vows, especially the vow of poverty, does not make sense to average Asians who must fight poverty all through their lives. We need to create a new identity and lifestyle that give more credibility to our being Asian disciples of Jesus who are consecrated to be an incarnational and prophetic presence for mission especially among those on the margins of our society where life is threatened and insecure.<sup>92</sup>

### **c. The Challenge of Freedom to Obedience**

The way in which religious women stress the importance of this Evangelical counsel and the thorough way in which they practice it are so evident that for women religious there seems to be no need to be emphasized. Finding God's Will is a life of lifelong listening and the way to find the divine Will is often difficult, however religious women learn to search for it in the circumstances and events that surround and affect their life.

The challenge of obedience comes from that notion of freedom which separates this fundamental human good from its essential relationship to the truth and to moral norms.<sup>93</sup> In the Gospels we see that Jesus left the crowd and went to a quiet places to pray, to know His Fathers Will for Him. From his example Jesus responded in love by carrying out the Will of God in his life. Therefore, obedience has to do with listening and

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<sup>92</sup> Mary Sujita Kallupurakkathu, "*Opportunities and Challenges for Apostolic Consecrated life and the Theology of Consecrated life in Asia: Some Reflections*" (Rome, via dei Penitenzieri 2011), 3. [http://www.dominicasanunciata.org/825/activos/texto/wdomi\\_pdf\\_4890-mAMy11mRlaUY39JN.pdf](http://www.dominicasanunciata.org/825/activos/texto/wdomi_pdf_4890-mAMy11mRlaUY39JN.pdf) accessed on July 27, 2015.

<sup>93</sup> John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, no. 91. p. 142.

responding properly. However it is hard to be still and listen in our today's noisy world.

VC expresses that,

In an especially vigorous way this obedience repropose the obedience of Christ to the Father and taking this mystery as its point of departure, testifies that there is no contradiction between obedience and freedom. Indeed, the Son's attitude discloses the mystery of human freedom as the path of obedience to the Father's Will, and the mystery of obedience as the path to the gradual conquest of true freedom. Precisely this mystery which consecrated persons wish to acknowledge by this particular vow.<sup>94</sup>

The vow of obedience, that religious women profess, calls them to listen deeply to God and to the charisma and superiors of their congregation. They are called to listen to God's Will in all things. For that, religious women listen to the "signs and times" and are called to be attentive to the needs of the world here and now. Women religious are faithful to the charism of their particular congregation by discerning the working of the Holy Spirit in their apostolic work and in their communities. This means that they will enter into mutual discernment with their community, offering their gifts in service for others. Obedience honors both the personal gifts of the individual member and the commitment of the community, by a fruitful way of mutual listening and discerning.

Women religious are bound to face difficult challenges in their way of presence in societies and in their apostolic work. The greater need for solidarity with their contemporaries, predominantly with the poor and the needy, binds consecrated men and women to become more actively involved even in the world of work and politics.<sup>95</sup> At the synod it was stated that consecrated life has not only proved to help and support the

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<sup>94</sup> John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, no. 91. p. 142-143.

<sup>95</sup> "Religious and Human Promotion", 3-9.

Church in the past, but also in the present and future.<sup>96</sup> Pope John Paul II wrote *Vita Consecrata* in order that consecrated men and women might contribute to the common reflections of the Church and all her vocations, in a mutual listening to the experience and desires of the entire people of God.

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<sup>96</sup> John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 6.

## B. Ecclesiae in Asia

As all know that the Catholic Church in Asia is a Church of tiny minorities, except in the Philippines and in East Timor; in many places she functions as a minority Church. We also acknowledge that our Church still carries the image of an alien Church because of a lack of appropriate reflection on genuine efforts for its inculturation process.<sup>97</sup> According to Luis Antonio Tagle, the challenges of mission that he discerned were embedded in those stories of life and struggle, of persecution and difficulties, all encountered in living out the faith in different contexts of Asia.<sup>98</sup> Within all the challenges, we can see many signs of hope and vitality in the Asian Church especially in her many vocations to religious life. There is a growing openness to the mission *ad gentes* and a willingness to move into new frontier mission where the presence and service of religious is disparately needed.

As *Ecclesia in Asia* expresses, “their silent example of poverty and abnegation, of purity and sincerity, of self-sacrifice in obedience, can become an eloquent witness capable of touching all people of good will and leading to a fruitful dialogue with surrounding cultures and religions”<sup>99</sup> Moreover, the Apostolic Exhortation adds, “*the search for God, a life of fraternal communion and service to others* are the three chief characteristics of the consecrated life which can offer an appealing Christian testimony to

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<sup>97</sup> Federation Asian Bishop Conference (FABC), “*Consecrated Religious life in Asia: As witness of Church as community of Faith*” no. 33i. P. 1.

<sup>98</sup> Peter C. Phan, *The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries*, (New York, NY: Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 2002), 213.

<sup>99</sup>John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, 44

the people of Asia today”.<sup>100</sup> Overall, by being true to what they profess, consecrated men and women can provide a powerful life of witness to God’s reign before their contemporaries.

*Ecclesia in Asia* explores the concrete situation of contemporary Asia, such as the culture, economic, social, political, and historical context of religious life. The Asian Church accepts that “a critical awareness of the diverse and complex realities of Asia is essential if the people of God are to respond to God’s will for them in the new evangelization” (*EA* no. 5).<sup>101</sup>

The main Challenge of the third Christian Millennium is that of a New Evangelization.<sup>102</sup> For the Church to fulfill this missionary task, it is essential to have a “critical awareness of the diverse and complex realities in Asia.”<sup>103</sup> Asia is “heir to ancient cultures, religions, religions, and traditions.”<sup>104</sup> Therefore, the Church has to show the deepest respect for these traditions and seeks to participate in sincere dialogue with their followers,<sup>105</sup> as *Nostra Aetate* writes, “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions.” Furthermore, “she has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men.” The declaration went on to say that the Church “proclaims and is

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<sup>100</sup>*Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>101</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 5.

<sup>102</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 5.

<sup>103</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 6.

<sup>104</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 6.

<sup>105</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, no.7.

duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life (Jn. 1:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (2 Cor. 5:18-19), men find the fullness of their religious life.”<sup>106</sup> This is a very important task of women religious in Asia: to show deep respect for the ancient traditions and values of Asian religions and cultures and at the same time to witness and profess Jesus Christ as way, truth, and life.

But Asia is also home of the poorest nations on earth; with millions of oppressed people who for centuries have been kept economically, culturally, and politically on the margins of society.<sup>107</sup> The new evangelization has to be a proclamation of loving service to the poor; a love that shows preference to the defenseless and voiceless; a preferential love that embraces the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, and the homeless, those without medical care.<sup>108</sup>

In this kind of Church the poor of Asia will feel at home because it is truly the Church of the poor living the option for the poor.<sup>109</sup> Most of the Religious women congregations work with the poor and the needy. As VC stated “The option for the poor is inherent in the very structure of love lived in Christ. All of Christ’s disciples are therefore held to this option, but those who follow the Lord more closely and imitating his attitudes cannot feel involved in a very special way.”<sup>110</sup> A great number of consecrated persons,

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<sup>106</sup> Second Vatican Council, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate* (1965), no. 2.

<sup>107</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 32, 34.

<sup>108</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 34.

<sup>109</sup> Sergio Maniba, “Dialogue with the poor: A new way of Being Church in the Diocese of San Jose, Antique,” *Religious Life Asia*, vol. XV, no. 2. April-June 2013, 66

<sup>110</sup> John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 82.

above all women, carry out their apostolate in the field of health care, according to the charism of their respective institution.<sup>111</sup>

Women have another function according to Christianity and as reflected in Mary.<sup>112</sup> She embraces society, the poor and the needy, contains them as the mother of the community.<sup>113</sup> Pope Francis says that women have the gift of maternity, of tenderness, a religious community that transforms not into a chauvinist society, one that is austere, hard and hardly sacred.<sup>114</sup>

Our late Pope John Paul II has called for a “new evangelization” in this millennium. To set the consecrated life in the context of this new evangelization in Asia, religious women need to take on seriously the challenges the Asian people face.<sup>115</sup> The response of these religious women has to be to become more “friends of Jesus”, like Abraham who “spoke with God face to face.” Then women religious can witness to “what they have seen, touched and heard”. Religious Women will strive to be transfigured to his image and likeness through prayer, the word of the Holy Scriptures, the liturgy, the sacraments, and in the care for the poor.<sup>116</sup>

As *EA* notes, “Asia is the world’s largest continent and is home to nearly two-thirds of the world’s population”; its variety of peoples are “heir to ancient cultures,

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<sup>111</sup> John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 83.

<sup>112</sup> Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Abraham Skorka, *On Heaven and on Earth*, (New York: Random House, 2010), 134.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>115</sup> Julma C. Neo, “The Witness of Consecrated Life in Asia Today,” (FABC) no. 92b, p.12.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 12

religions and traditions”. One is amazed “at the sheer size of Asia’s population and at the intricate mosaic of its many cultures, languages, beliefs and traditions”, economically, socially, and politically, “situations on the Asian continent are very diverse, defying any simple classification.”<sup>117</sup> (n.7). *EA* highlights various concrete pastoral concerns: rapid change, migration, nuclear power, tourism, population growth, poverty, women, and a host of additional challenges. One of the challenges for women religious congregations that can affect them is technology, media and modernization. It seems that this technology and the media affects the life of religious congregations. Many congregational chapters and meetings have reflected continually on their adverse effects on the quality of community life, prayer commitment and the spirituality of the members in general.<sup>118</sup> Sister Mary Sujita Kallupurakkathu, SND, acclaims that the greatest challenges and opportunity for Asian religious is to be mystic people who are impelled by the passion for Christ and his compassionate mission. If religious women are serious about being the avant-garde of the transforming presence of Christ in Asia, then they must embrace a lifestyle that witnesses prophetically to the people, regardless of their cultural and faith traditions, according to the age-old Asian values of true holiness, contemplation, renunciation and asceticism, detachment and simplicity.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 7.

<sup>118</sup> Julma C. Neo, “The Witness of Consecrated Life in Asia Today,”(FABC) no. 92b, p. 7.

<sup>119</sup> Sujita Kallupurakkathu, “Opportunities and Challenges for Apostolic Consecrated life and the Theology of Consecrated life in Asia: Some Reflections,” 2.

## Chapter III: Apostolate of Religious Women Congregations in contemporary Philippines and East Timor

Today there are many women who work or serve in a public role in the Church. The Women's role in the Church deserves the comment that God chooses his own instruments. Following the Second Vatican Council of the 1960's, religious women left the wall of their convents and many engaged in new social apostolates, for instance some took up the cause to aid the poor, some got involved in environmental concerns, while others began a work aimed at bridging the gaps between Catholic and Muslim communities. Nowadays there are many increasing challenges, in the social, political, economic, and cultural arenas of life despite the resistances and confusion that come along with any kind of social change.

2015 is the Year of Consecrated Life with the theme that of consecrated life is about prophetic witness to the Gospel of Joy among the poor.

As the Catholic Church celebrates the year of the consecrated life, Members of the Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines (AMRSP) expressed that:

Missionary life is a sign of radical hope "as they proclaim God's word and work towards the complete transformation of society" They noted, "This is all because we hope in the God of the covenant, who promises fullness of life and love for all peoples." The statement began by expressing the religious gratitude to God for the gift of Religious life.

It gratefully remembered the contributions of religious in Philippine history. Again the AMRSP said, "We also remember with gratitude the generous and courageous consecrated women, who in crucial moments of the history of the Filipino people, stood

up for the Gospel as what had happened in those turbulent years of dictatorship, which was put to an end through a peaceful exercise of People Power.” Their important role in the Church in the Philippine’s own journey to the ultimate future, the religious declared, “Our consecration is a sign of total faith: the Reign of God is worth abandoning everything and dedicating one’s whole self and entire life for its sake. Our fraternal life in community is a sign of inclusive love: the grand design of God includes the communion of all peoples in their diversities. According to AMRSP, the religious are called to “live the present with passion” in keeping with the Pope’s reminder that “Religious life is prophecy.” In other words, we are urged to join the victims of typhoons, earthquakes, and floods, of injustices and corruptions, of neglect of one’s social and personal responsibilities to be the prophetic voice of the Spirit, who, deep in the hearts of the marginalized and abandoned, is crying for mercy, justice, and compassion. Let our words and actions be signs of assurance that a better life is possible for those who have been pushed to the social, economic, and political peripheries, it stressed.<sup>120</sup>

Living in today’s world is a great challenge for religious women congregations. It is a special challenge for them to concretize the prophetic dimension of their life. Evangelization today necessarily includes tackling social issues that are causing great misery and suffering for the people. Religious Women Congregations have actually involved themselves in many of these issues, like fighting human trafficking or slavery. However, whether the factors are external or internal, the lack of tangible, long lasting success in many struggles for transformation is enough to discourage the fainthearted.

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<sup>120</sup> “*Philippine Religious grateful to live their mission*” CBCP News on January 29, 2015. <http://directory.ucanews.com/news/philippine-religious-grateful-to-live-their-mission/1891> accessed on July 28, 2015.

Yet, in spite of all these constraints, frustrations, and disappointments, religious women must remain steadfast and never lose hope which is an important theological virtue for Christians.

Hope is anchored in one's memory of God's fidelity, of unexpected, unplanned interventions of the Holy Spirit in seemingly hopeless situations. Living in a time when the Church has lost so much credibility, causing hopelessness and helplessness among its members, Pope Francis, in his actions and words, provides us with new and great Hope.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> "Mabuhay Pope Francis," *World Mission*, vol. XXVII, no. 281, (January 2015), 27.

## A. Challenges for Religious Women Congregations in the Philippines

In the light of the preceding discussions of general challenges of Religious life, there are specific challenges faced by religious women congregations are facing.

The first challenge for religious women is to become truly what they are called to be. In the light of their discipleship in Christ, they are called to be living signs of hope and givers of life. In the middle of death – threatening realities, they are called to identify themselves with the poor and the oppressed and to go beyond barriers in order to usher in transformation and a better life.<sup>122</sup> Religious women congregations are called to be signs of life for others. Today there are various forms of suffering, of fragmentation, causing great poverty and disruptive conflicts among the people.<sup>123</sup> Disintegration can happen any time in personal life, family life, in gender relations or in the social, cultural, ecological, and political realm.<sup>124</sup> The other specific and real challenge facing religious women congregations in the Philippine are facing is the decline of vocations as one of the most serious problems facing the Church. The study already mentioned this issue in chapter two. Sister Judette Gallares, RC states,

The numbers who choose religious life as a life option are decreasing, but today the call of Christ in the Gospel is essentially the same. However, the fast-changing world around us and our evolving consciousness of ourselves and the

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<sup>122</sup> Virginia Fabella and Quirico Pedregosa, “Religious Life: A service to life in Asia Today,” (FABC Papers), no. 72i, 10.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.* 10.

reality are challenging us to expand our understanding of our call and to respond to it in a way that is new and relevant for today.<sup>125</sup>

The phenomenon of the “inverted pyramid” because the numbers of older and retiring sisters are increasing while the new members are decreasing. As a consequence, what was used to be flourishing institutions are now dying. Religious women congregations are experiencing a decline in practically every aspect of life.<sup>126</sup> The decreasing number of religious women reveals a lack of stamina and inner strength to deal with the many-sided demands in community life and modern mission. Being smaller in numbers in their communities’ prompts women religious congregations also to look into new models of leadership, as old paradigms do not seem to work as effectively as they used to in the past.<sup>127</sup> Religious women Congregations are still discerning what might be the call of the Holy Spirit for Religious Women Congregations in today’s specific situation and chaos.

Many religious women are not trained sufficiently, educated and formed to face the challenges of our fast-changing world, where more professionalism is being demanded. In addition, many Religious women are ageing and have to retire in their positions. Their congregations are confronted with a lack of personnel to take on leadership and other responsibilities, not to speak to respond to new calls. These are just a few issues confronting Religious Women Congregations in the Philippines today.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Judette Gallares, “Missionary and Spiritual impulse: An unavoidable call to Religious Life” *Religious life Asia*, vol. XV, no. 2. April–June 2013, 82.

<sup>126</sup> Gallares, “Missionary and Spiritual impulse: An unavoidable call to Religious Life,” 83.

<sup>127</sup> Gallares, “Missionary and Spiritual impulse: An unavoidable call to Religious Life,” 83.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 8

One of the big issues that happens in today's world is human trafficking, and it is quite a surprise when the author read one article saying that women in Philippines pose as Nuns or Sisters to ensnare children into being trafficked. According to a news outlet in the Philippines, girls in the countryside were trapped away from their home with the promise of studying in Manila. They are captured into a life of human trafficking by women dressed as Catholic Nuns.<sup>129</sup> One Victim explained her experience:

She said a group called “Babalam Kevalam” visited her area on a “relief operation” four months after the devastating typhoon. “One of the members, who identified herself as a nun, approached us while we were planting in our community garden,” she said. “She asked the five of us who at that time we are 12-13 years old if we wanted to study in Manila. She offered us scholarships. All of us agreed and immediately “Babalam Kevalam” went to our parents and asked their permission to bring us to Manila. On the bus to Manila, a man wary of the “nuns”, began asking questions of the children. Upon arrival in Manila, he brought the police to the bus. The women were not able to produce paperwork that gave them permission to transport the children, so the children were taken into protective custody until they could be returned home.”<sup>130</sup>

Last year 2014 typhoons have estimated displaced around 14 million people. Since many religious organizations, including women religious congregations, are involved in helping Filipino people, it is hard to imagine to tell the people, especially the children, “Beware of the nuns.”<sup>131</sup> This is a big challenge for Religious women Congregations and the society, with this kind of pretention to dress like a sister to traffic human. This makes people loose trust in the sisters,

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<sup>129</sup> Elise Hilton, “*Women in Philippines pose as Nuns to Ensnare children into Trafficking*” (July 6, 2015), <http://blog.acton.org/archives/79942-women-in-philippines-pose-as-nuns-to-ensnare-children-into-trafficking.html> Accessed on July 29, 2015.

<sup>130</sup> Hilton, “*Women in Philippines pose as Nuns to Ensnare children into Trafficking*” (July 6, 2015), <http://blog.acton.org/archives/79942-women-in-philippines-pose-as-nuns-to-ensnare-children-into-trafficking.html> Accessed on July 29, 2015.

<sup>131</sup> Hilton, “*Women in Philippines pose as Nuns to Ensnare children into Trafficking*” (July 6, 2015), <http://blog.acton.org/archives/79942-women-in-philippines-pose-as-nuns-to-ensnare-children-into-trafficking.html>. Accessed on July 29, 2015.

and this has also an impact on the religious sisters. As Jesus reminds his disciples not to believe a false messiah or false prophet, “And if anyone says to you at that time, ‘Look! Here is the Messiah!’ or ‘Look! There he is! Do not believe it. False messiah and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible the elect. But be alert; I have already told you everything.” (Mark 13:21-23; Matt. 24:23-26). But these incidents show also that it is important for Sisters to be deep rooted in the life of the people and to live a committed life for years among the people to get to know them over generations. Like a good Shepherd they have to know the people and share their lives. Only through a real long term avoided commitment can lies and deception be encountered. One important way here is to be involved in the school apostolate in order to get to know families and children.

## **B. Challenges for Religious Women Congregations in East Timor exemplified in the Mission of the Dominican Sisters**

In this section the study is going to present the work of the Missionary Dominican Sisters of the Rosary in East Timor. However, since the study does not have available substantial written documents on this topic, the source of information will be mainly interviews with three Dominican Sisters: Sr. Teresa OP, Sr. Belen OP, and Sr. Julieta OP. These interviews are about the history of the beginning of the establishment of this Congregation in East Timor.

### **a. The Mission of the Missionary Dominican Sisters of the Rosary**

The Missionary Dominican Sisters of the Rosary is an international missionary Congregation, founded by Bishop Ramon Zubieta and Blessed Ascension Nicol Goni in Lima, Peru. Ascension Nicol Goni placed into the scales of history her own life, by contributing significantly towards the existence of a new Religious Missionary Congregation: The Missionary Dominican Sisters of the Rosary. By choosing as its charism “The Evangelization of the Poorest” this new order contributed to the cause of the poor with the life commitment and work of hundreds of its members. The purpose of the entire Congregation is to help to direct people along the road of human brotherhood as children of God. Shaping the course of history, today more than ever, means to take side with the poor, as Jesus did. This is exactly what this extraordinary woman did, whom we proudly call our founder.

## *1. Life Background of the Founders*

Blessed Ascensión Nicol Goñi was born at Tafalla on March 14 1868, a small town in the province of Navarra, Spain. She came from a lower middle class family, but given the standard of that time, it was not at all an uncomfortable setting. Religious traditions and contemporary culture made of their house a real home.<sup>132</sup> Blessed Ascensión Nicol Goñi was enrolled at the boarding school of the Convent Beaterio of Santa Rosa in Huesca in December 1881, a religious community of cloistered Sisters of the Third Order of Saint Dominic, in a school considered to be an important institution school in that region. It was there, where Nicol was able to experience her own vocation to religious life.<sup>133</sup> In February 1883, Nicol felt called to join the Dominican Sisters who taught her, but first she returned home to reflect on her vocation. Finally, on October Nicol entered the novitiate of the Beaterio.<sup>134</sup> In 1886, Blessed Nicol professed religious vows, and became a teacher at a school and served in that capacity for the next 27 years.<sup>135</sup>

Under the anti-clerical laws promulgated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, in the years 1913 the Spanish government took the school over and expelled the Sisters.<sup>136</sup> Thus, in the year 1913 Ascensión Nicol started a new journey in life with a definite orientation. She began to travel this new road with faith and in her constant attitude of openness and

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<sup>132</sup> Sister Nieves Campion, "Ascension Nicol Goni Co-Founders of the Congregation of Missionary Dominican Sisters of the Rosary," edited and trans. Fr. Herrero S.J. and Sister Mary Joseph O.P. (Madrid, Misioneras Dominica), 3.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>134</sup> "Beata Ascensión Nicol Goñi, Religiosa Misionera (1864-1940): Cofundadora de la Congregación de Hermanas Misioneras Dominicanas del Rosario". Monjas Dominicanas de Origuella (in Spanish).

<sup>135</sup> "Nuestra Fundadora: Madre Ascensión Nicol Goñi". *Misioneras Dominicanas Del Rosario (in Spanish)*.

<sup>136</sup> "Bl. Ascensión of the Heart of Jesus Nicol Goñi", Vatican News Service. [http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint\\_id=6011](http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=6011) accessed July 22, 2015.

availability. It took the form of an exodus like Abraham: "...Leave your land and your home and go to the land I shall show..." (Genesis 12:1-2). Once the exodus begun, the journey to be taken was mapped out day by day. Every hillock, every turn of the road became a challenge, opening up to the unknown.



*Figure 4: Blessed Ascensión Nicol Goñi (1868-1940) Bishop Ramon Zubieta (1864- 1921)*

Upon studying the periodicals issued by various Missionary Congregations, the Sisters decided to act on a proposal they were long considering as their new Missionary service and which they had got to know from others congregations. The Sisters wrote letters to ecclesiastical authorities in America and the Philippines, in search of a mission field where they could help the poorest of the poor. With the arrival of Friar Ramon Zubieta, O.P. at Huesca to speak with the Sisters, a window of opportunity opened for them: he wanted to get help in his new responsibility in Peru. Five of the Sisters who

volunteered for this new mission were selected, and Blessed Ascensión was chosen to lead this group. Friar Ramon Zubieta was a former missionary in the Philippines and had just been appointed by the Holy See as the Apostolic Vicar of a new Vicariate in the Peruvian Amazons. The Friar travelled first to Rome for his consecration as a Bishop.<sup>137</sup>

## *2. New Horizon: Gospel Witness to the Poor*

In the same year 1913 on November, five volunteer Sisters left Huesca accompanied by the new Bishop and with three other friars who were going to serve in the new territory. On December 30 1913 they landed in Peru at the Port of Callao. When they arrived in Lima, the Sisters were given hospitality by the Dominican Sisters of the convent at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Patronage, of which they took possession the following year. After two years Blessed Ascensión set off in 1915 with two other Sisters to their final destination in the mountain forest. After 24 days of journey, crossing the Andes to a region where white women had never before travelled, they arrived in Puerto Maldonado, a small village in the Amazon basin, located between two large rivers, Madre de Dios and the Tambopata.<sup>138</sup>

Upon arriving, the Sisters began immediately teaching the girls of the region and they started to build a school for them. Rapidly, the indigenous girls from the Baraya tribe started to come from the forest to receive education. This happened despite the

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<sup>137</sup>"Bl. Ascensión of the Heart of Jesus Nicol Goñi". Vatican News Service. [http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint\\_id=6011](http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=6011) accessed on July 23, 2015.

<sup>138</sup> Sister Nieves Campion, "Ascension Nicol Goni Co-Founders of the Congregation of Missionary Dominican Sisters of the Rosary," edited and trans. Fr. Herrero S.J. and Sister Mary Joseph O.P. (Madrid, Misioneras Dominicicas), 13-14.

hostility of the white plantation workers who formed the population of the town.<sup>139</sup>The lack of any locally organized health care led also the poor and the sick to come to the Sisters for help. The Sisters responded to their needs, and cared for them. They began to visit people in their houses, especially the sick, and provided help wherever they could. Finally the Sisters concentrated their service mainly to medical care as their primary apostolate.

The new congregation was formally established on 5 October 1918 at the Convent of Our Lady of the Patronage in Lima, Peru. Mother Ascensión Nicol Goñi was elected as the first Prioress General of the congregation, and she served in that office the rest of her life. She also became the Mistress of novices, training the new candidates of the congregation at their novitiate in Spain. During her generalship, Mother Ascensión Nicol Goñi led wisely her Sisters to establish communities in other countries. Mother Ascension started this new congregation because she belong to semi cloistered nuns, however, when she decided to be a missionary, she realized that this form does not fit to their mission and work. That is one of the reason why she founded this new congregation.

In 1932 Mother Ascensión led the beginnings of a new mission in mainland China, establishing a community there what became to be the basis of their future presence in Asia. She also started her congregation in Spain where they were able to recruit and train many missionaries. The General Mother house of the congregation was established in Pamplona, Navarre, Spain, which became the base for all future activities.

By 1938 Mother Ascensión felt increasingly frail and wanted to retire to prepare

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<sup>139</sup>"Bl. Ascensión of the Heart of Jesus Nicol Goñi". Vatican News Service. [http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint\\_id=6011](http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=6011) accessed on July 23, 2015.

herself for her final days. Nevertheless she accepted her unanimous re-election for a third term as Prioress General at the congregation's General Chapter was held on September 1939. But she died already on 24 February 1940.

Today the Congregation counts 785 Sisters serving in 21 nations in five continents.<sup>140</sup> Until today, this new congregation is known in many places and mostly in Asia with many members or Sisters. The writer believes that Blessed Ascensión and Bishop Ramon Zubieta's work became really fruitful for so many people.

I take in the next chapter the opportunity to write more in detail about the work and mission of the Dominican Sisters of the Rosary in East Timor.

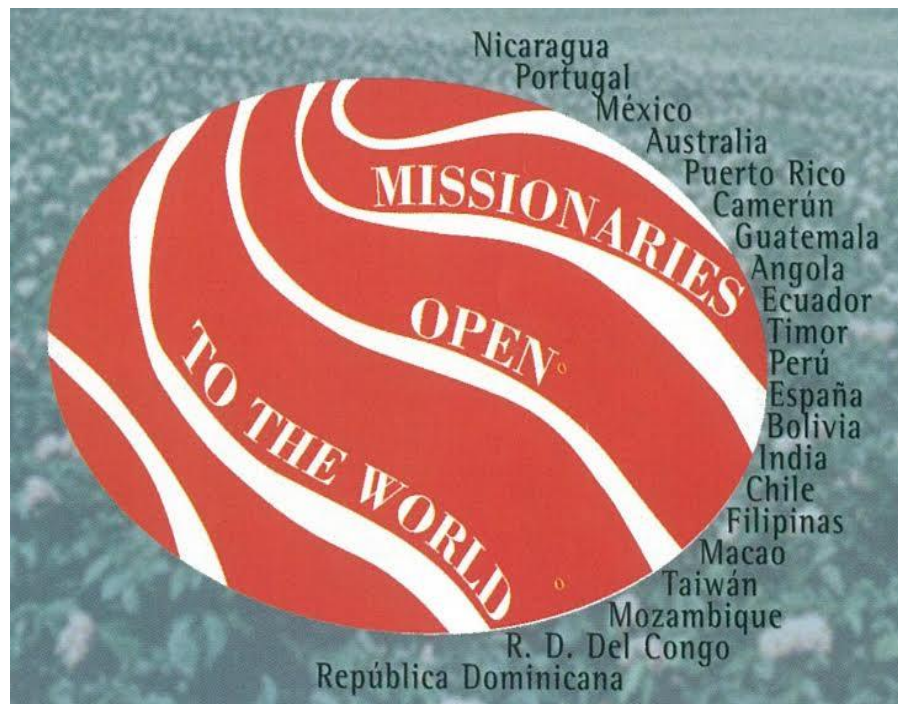


Figure 5: Countries with Missions on Five Continents

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<sup>140</sup>"Bl. Ascensión of the Heart of Jesus Nicol Goñi". *Vatican News Service* [http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php? saint\\_id=6011](http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php? saint_id=6011) accessed July 23, 2015

## **b. History of the Opening of the Mission in East Timor**

As already mentioned previously, in the year 1932 the Province of China was founded by Blessed Ascensión Nicol. The Sisters started first to work in Foochow and they established a School and a Hospital in Foochow. When the communists expelled the missionaries from the Southern Provinces of China in 1947, the Sisters divided themselves into four different groups. Some Sisters went to the Leprosarium in Zamboanga City, Philippines, invited by Fr. Fernandez, a Jesuit priest; the second group went to Timor, the third group to Macau, and the fourth group to Taiwan.

The Missionary Dominican Sisters of the Rosary as a religious congregation, started their apostolic work in East Timor, in 1954 through the invitation of Bishop Jaime Goular. The Sisters started their first mission in Oe-cousi. The representative of Portugal, Mr. Tinoco helped them a lot in the beginning of their work in Timor. They started with a boarding house for children in that place. No school had been there yet and so the people were illiterate. It was the same kind of mission similar to that of Maldonado in Peru, to educate indigenous women and children in order to help them and empower them to be considered and fully accepted members of their society. Since the very start of this mission, youth education has been their priority there, which is also according to their own religious charisma of empowering the people in the community where the Sisters live and work.

The Sisters, who started this mission, were refugees from China and there were four Sisters at the outset of this endeavor, as Sister Teresa Errea describes:

Then they opened a house in Maliana, and another one in Ermera. For a while these missions were taken care by the Portuguese Province, but in 1970 the

General Chapter decided that they should belong to the Province of St. Louis Beltran, Philippines. Later on the three Timorese Sisters also joined the congregation. These three Sisters are: Me. Laurinda Mestre, who passed away last year, Me. Rosary Afoan and Me. Manuela Sufa. However, Me. Laurinda Mestre was under the formation of Portugal. Unfortunately, when the civil war broke out in the early 70's, the sisters were forced to leave Timor-Leste and go to the Philippines to continue their formation.<sup>141</sup>

After their final profession the two Timorese Sisters, Sr. Rosary Afoan OP and Sr. Manuela Sufa OP, returned to East Timor and reopened the congregation in 1992. A Timorese Sister, Rosario Afoan requested many times – when she was in Australia living a comfortable life – that she wanted to return to Timor to give back to her people what she had received from the Spanish Sisters.

When the sisters returned to Timor they talked with Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo, SDB, about the re-establishment of the congregation there. First Bishop Ximenes asked them to help and cook for the seminarians, but the Sisters stayed very strong and answered the Bishop that “Our Charisma is not for cooking but to serve the people especially where the Church needs us most.” Upon hearing this, the Bishop told the Sisters to go and to open a community in Soibada in the District of Manatuto. So they started there a mission in a poor area with the few things they possessed at that time. In 1995 another two Sisters from the Philippines were sent to help them in this new mission in East Timor. These two sisters are Sr. Pelagia Virtudazo OP and Sr. Evangelina Evangelista OP. Then, little by little and by the help and grace of God, the community was growing until today through the work of those Sisters.

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<sup>141</sup> Sister Teresa Errea, Missionary Dominican Sister of the Rosary, interview by the author, Macau, December 18, 2014.

Sister Evangelina Evangelista OP expresses about their mission, “This time their mission was social-pastoral and education. We teach catechesis to children, to youth group, to women and the under-privileged people in the communities. When Timor-Leste celebrated Independence Day in 2002, we were active participants in its quest for a successful nation building by providing the youths and women with trainings in basic computer skills, sewing, English language and other basic courses related to practical life skills. Now we are present in three districts in Timor Leste, in Oecusesse, in Manatutu (Salau) or Soibada, and two communities are in Dili Bidau and Comoro. Some of our Sisters are also teaching Religious Education in the School. Some Sisters are bringing the communion to the sick, the prisoners and to elderly people every Sunday.”<sup>142</sup> At present there are the following communities serving in East Timor:

### *1. The Dominican Orphanage*

This Orphanage is located in Bidau, Mota-Klaran. At the moment there are 63 children, 25% are really true orphans but the rest are children of single mothers. These children are very vulnerable, because if they are left unprotected they could become prostitutes, victims of human trafficking, or generally a problem to the society. Most of them are orphans by having no father or mother. Most of these children are brought to us by police authorities or referred to us by religious friends from the district. There are five sisters serving them, two are perpetually professed and three junior professed.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Sister Evangelina Evangelista, Missionary Dominican Sister of the Rosary, interview by the author, Macau, December 18, 2014.

<sup>143</sup> Sister Julieta da Costa, Missionary Dominican Sister of the Rosary, Interview by the author on Macau, December 18, 2014.

## *2. Internado Dormitory in Oecusse*

Located at the district of Oecusse, where the young girls in this dormitory are coming from a far district, and the sisters provide them with a “Home away from Home” ambiance. Girls from 6-16 years of age receive a good valuable formation and discipline from the sisters, molding them to become good Christians and citizens. A good indication is, that most of the children got the highest grade in their school report card and became good competitors at school. This community consists of five sisters, four perpetually professed sisters and one junior. This dormitory was donated by Portuguese people in order to cater to the less fortunate children by helping and teaching them to become able to live a better life.

## *3. Dormitory (Asrama) in Salau*

This dormitory is located within five hours travel distance from Dili, the capital of Timor Leste. In the past, this dormitory was in Soibada, and just recently it was moved to Salau due to the new construction there. At the present, there are 53 children living there, and the children stay at the dormitory during the whole school year. These children are at the age of 7 to 18 years old. They are supported by their parents in terms of their food allowance. Just like in any other dormitory it has been the objective that children will receive a good value formation so that they become able to contribute well to the society in the future and also to develop future leaders with an orientation in Christian values. The community there is composed of three sisters, two have perpetual profess and one of them is a junior profess.

#### *4. Kindergarten School and Aspirancy House*

This community is located at Beto-Barat in Comoro and is composed of three sisters, two perpetually professed and one junior. These sisters have their apostolate work in the Kindergarten and the Aspirancy House for candidates who stay there for six months before going to Macau. At the moment we have 64 children enrolled in our Kindergarten School. Which provide the poor children from this area. Most of the family livings in this area are immigrant settlers coming from different districts and villages of East Timor, in which, after the war, they have decided to settle in Dili particularly in Comoro, where our convent is situated. In 2006, during the uprising of aggression of the young people in East Timor, our convent happened to be a refugee house of the immigrant settlers. After the war, the sisters put up a kindergarten school upon the request of the settlers, so their children can study. The Sisters respond to the needs of that time.

We have newly created apostolates which are a youth apostolate and a women development project. The latter responds to the empowering of women for the capacity as co-earners in the family. This project of capacity building of local women creates also jobs for the mothers even at home doing chores for the family.

## Conclusion

This dissertation focusses on the experience, challenges and apostolic works of religious women in the Philippines and in East Timor. There are still some vocations for religious life in East Timor and the Philippines, despite of ongoing modernization and globalization processes in these countries. Young women full of zeal and enthusiasm dedicate their lives to serve the poor and the marginalized of the society. Though religious life is set apart and different to married life it is no longer so widespread like in the past. It is good to note that Christian families, at least in some part of these two countries, still consider their children to respond to the call of the Lord, seeing religious life as a blessing and privilege. They encourage their children to commit their lives to this cause and enter a congregation. On the other hand in some parts of these two countries; parents do not encourage their children any more to enter this form of life. Very few of them mention the religious or priestly life as option for the future.

The essence of life and witness of Religious women, which has its root and origin in the Church of the first centuries, is alive today in the engaged religious women in East Timor and the Philippines and beyond. In the context of societal and cultural transformation of contemporary societies, religious women have the courage to follow the Lord in vows and to organize themselves to address the great need for education of girls and care of the sick, poor, disabled, and to show solidarity to victims of many other causes. Their Mission today is accomplished in a world that suffers very often from a great economic abyss, divided by north and south with a huge breach of justice, with the experience of a life at dehumanizing frontiers, like prisons, marginalized areas, street

children, aids victims. Women in many societies are especially victims and constantly struggling for survival together with those in their care.

The challenge remains for religious women congregations to determine the uniqueness of their contributions to ecclesial life, to find and give better direction how to serve best in societies and the church, and to judge more critically the long-term effects of human choices. For many communities the clock is running out and Sisters are aging very rapidly. Some religious communities will decline and die, others may revive if they manage to face the challenges ahead. This can be also seen simply as what it means to be live through a transitional time of major paradigm changes.

Yet these are not times without hope. Despite the depth of the challenges, which this research tried to highlight in some way, there are also sparks of light, signs of fiery spirit in the experience of a life in religious vows, which is also evident from studies dealing with religious women. There is marvelous interest in the future of religious life evidenced by the amount of recent research. Current members of religious institutes are strongly committed to this way of life, their ministry and to their communities. Many communities are energized by a renewed understanding of their charism, with a wide range of opportunities, as Pope Francis writes to religious people: “wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world. It is this witness I expect from you! Religious men and women who can awaken the World.”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup>Quoted from: Inigo Joachim, “Response to Sr. Schneider’s Talk,” *Religious Life Asia*, vol. XVII, no. 1. January-March 2015, 89.

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