

VERBUM SVD

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- Faithful and Creative Discipleship in a Wounded World. A Reflection on the 2024 SVD General Chapter Theme
- Preferential Option for the Poor: Human Rights and the Ecclesiastical Approach to Sustainable Development Goal 1
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- John Prior, SVD, and the Option for the Marginalized in Maumere
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- God's Will – Human Desire. The Events that Led to Mother Maria's Transfer to the Cloister



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Yosef Keladu, SVD, Ignas Ledot, SVD, Kris Ibu*

JOHN PRIOR, SVD, AND THE OPTION FOR THE MARGINALIZED IN MAUMERE

A priest should be involved in the life of the faithful because such involvement is the basic spirit of a priestly vocation and at the same time is the essence of the Gospel message that he preaches. This article elaborates the model of the priesthood as expressed in the life of John Mansford Prior, SVD, an ordained minister of the Society of the Divine Word. John Prior's option for the marginalized was truly inspired by, and the embodiment of, the theology that he taught in the lecture hall, namely transformative theology. This was a new way of doing theology which used a practical, contextual approach method, namely "begin with the hopes and trials of the victims in society." John Prior's option was expressed in his own simple lifestyle and also in his constructive criticism of the church and in particular of the behavior of "a handful" of priests on Flores who were not concerned for the fate of a large proportion of the faithful whom they were called to serve. John Prior's option was expressed by his involvement with those on the fringes of society, especially HIV-AIDS victims and the incarcerated in Maumere.

But after being appointed to the main Ledalero community in 1987, I found it necessary to insert myself in one or other marginal group outside the seminary's monastic walls...¹

Introduction

Basically, every priest must be involved in the life of the faithful. His private reflections must be embodied in the public arena. The living-out and responsibility of the priesthood cannot be understood in a purely individual context. Rather it must be open to possibilities in the

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¹ John Mansford Prior, "1968: The Year of Mounting Lucidity," *Verbum SVD* 59:1-2 (2018) 11-24, 17.

public arena, through interaction with others. If a priest doesn't realize this, he will get caught up in private piety, while promoting faith and universal salvation as performing rituals and spiritual exercises. The involvement of ordained ministers in the dynamic of the life of the faithful is the basis of the priestly vocation and at the same time is a way of giving glory to God. The decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* states unequivocally:

The ultimate goal of the priesthood, which is to be achieved by their service and indeed their lives, is the glory of God the Father in Jesus. That glory occurs when people consciously, freely and with thankful hearts receive the work of God which is realized in Christ, which they show in their whole lives. Thus, when priests spend time in prayer and worship, or preaching the Word, or offering the sacrifice of the Eucharist and giving the other sacraments, or in service of their fellow women and men, they increase the glory of God and help their sisters and brothers grow together in the divine life.²

It follows that involvement with the marginalized is at the heart of the universal message of the Gospel, which means that the truth of Christian faith must bear true fruits. Praise, thanksgiving and prayers of petition offered in solitude must be expressed in solidarity with the world particularly with those who so often are victimized. Involvement with, and preference for, the weak, contextualizing the universal message of the Gospel, is a process of purifying and crystallizing the priesthood each day so that it is truly authentic.

Throughout history there have been so many great figures who have inspired the church in its evangelism because of their involvement with the marginalized. They are the inspirational ones who have had the ability to contextualize belief in God by being at one with the poor. The suffering of the marginalized sharpened their sensitivity towards acting in ways which broke down social barriers. They knew that the good news of the Kingdom of God is primarily focused on the marginalized.

One of these inspiring figures, the source of inspiration for this article, was Father John Mansford Prior, SVD, an SVD priest who gave his life for the people of the Diocese of Maumere, Flores, Indonesia. Aware of the sorrows and sufferings of the marginalized in Maumere, he left his comfort zone to be with them. He wasn't tied down by religious rituals or academic dogmas, but rather he searched for a

² "Presbyterorum Ordinis," No. 2, in *Dokumen Konsili Vatikan II*, ed. by R. Hardarwiriyana, Cet. XI. Jakarta: Dokpen KWI and Obor, ¹¹2012, 474.

religious identity and a contextual theology by being present in the real-life situations of the poor. His mission was to assure the marginalized that God is always with them.

To present this case, this article is divided into four sections. The first one is a profile of John M. Prior which gives background information as to why historically he became involved with the marginalized. The second section describes his prophetic voice which was expressed in his simple lifestyle. It also offers constructive criticism of the position of the church vis-à-vis its relationship to the marginalized and particularly of some of the Flores clergy who ignore the fate of a large proportion of the faithful whom they serve. Section three presents John as a professor who taught transformative theology, which was a new way of theologizing using a practical contextual approach, which “begins with the joys and struggles of society’s victims.” In the final section, the focus is on the ways John became involved with the marginalized, particularly with HIV-AIDS victims and those incarcerated in the Maumere jail.

A Short Profile of John Prior

John Mansford Prior was born to the couple Vincent Thomas Prior and Kathleen Mary Mansford, in Ipswich, England, on 14th October 1946.³ John’s father was an active union man. He championed workers’ rights and was inspired by the social teaching of the church, for about 40 years. He was also active in his parish and tried to live out Gospel values in his daily life. He was a man who took his duties seriously and had a strong sense of commitment, while at the same time leading an unpretentious life.⁴ John’s mother was focused on the family home. She was calm, focused and was strong-willed and ambitious, which John inherited from her in his adulthood. A strong feature of his parents’ life was their sense of service. They always had time for others, especially for union members.

John Prior’s primary education was at a school in St. Mary’s Parish, Woodbridge Road. In addition to his formal education, he learnt a lot from his parents for whom discipline was important. They balanced this with great love. His secondary schooling began at St. Joseph’s

³ A large part of this profile is from his biography, by Hsu Monica (ed.), *Merambah ke Segala Arah: Kisah Perjuangan John Mansford Prior, SVD di Nusa Bunga*, (Maumere: Ledalero Press, 2020), 15-74 and abstracted from Paul Budi Kleden and Robert Mirsal (eds.), *Menerobos Batas-Merobokkan Prasangka*, volume I Maumere: Ledalero Press 2011, 381-409.

⁴ Monica, *Merambah ke Segala Arah*, 18-40.

College, Birkfield, which was run by the De La Salle (FSC) Brothers. John chose to join the Divine Word Missionaries (SVD) in 1965. He entered the SVD Novitiate at Donamon Castle, Ireland, where he began studying philosophy, sociology and an introductory course in Sacred Scripture until 1968. From 1968 until 1972, John continued his studies at the London Missionary Institute. With seminarians from eight religious congregations he studied theology and social anthropology.

On 21st May 1972, John was ordained a priest by Bishop Charles Grant in his hometown, Ipswich. According to John, he specifically chose Pentecost Sunday so that “the Holy Spirit wouldn’t forget to come to me!”⁵ Then, in 1973, he studied Religious Education at the University of Cambridge where he was awarded a Diploma. In 1987 he completed his doctoral studies in intercultural theology and received a Ph.D. from the University of Birmingham.

As an SVD religious missionary priest, John was appointed to work in Flores, Indonesia, in the Archdiocese of Ende. He arrived in Maumere on 6th April 1973. He completed a course in Bahasa Indonesia in Ruteng, Manggarai, Flores. Then, at the beginning of January 1974 John accepted an appointment from the Archbishop of Ende, Mgr. Donatus Djagom, SVD, to be the assistant priest at St. Thomas Morus Parish, Maumere. He was assistant to a diocesan priest, Father Philipus Loi Riwu. In this, his first parish, he learnt about establishing and developing a Basic Christian Community. Based on the Scriptures, this was a *communio ecclesiarum* inspired by the Divine Word.⁶ This form of community was rooted in the model of the early church and the Gospel values. John wanted to promote a “grass roots” church, not one which was bound by a rigid hierarchical structure. He saw a “grass roots” church as a gathering of Jesus’ followers who were dedicated to

⁵ Ibid., 40-42.

⁶ Ibid., 46-47; John Mansford Prior, “Mengenang RD. Philipus Loi Riwu,” Walburgus Abulat, Egenius Moa, Jacob J. Herin (eds.), *The King’s Good Servant But God’s First: Kenangan 50 Tahun Paroki St. Thomas Morus Keuskupan Maumere*, Maumere: Penerbit Lamaholot 2022, 53-55. While on a sabbatical in 1979, John visited Bishop Christopher Mwoleka in Rulege, Tanzania. John witnessed the development of Basic Christian Communities there, comparing them to what had happened in St. Thomas More Parish, Maumere: John Mansford Prior, “Institut Misioner London 1967–2007: Gema Kenangan, Kilasan Api,” *Jurnal Ledalero*, 6:2 (2007) 267.

a new evangelization, which worked for the building-up of the whole person.⁷

After working in St. Thomas Morus Parish for seven years, John was appointed the pastor of the Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Parish, Wolofeo. In this new parish he focused on developing the Biblical Apostolate and accompanying groups of farmers. Serving his parishioners he used to go by foot to even the remotest villages.⁸

Having labored in Wolofeo for almost seven years, in 1987 John was transferred to the Ledalero Major Seminary where he lectured at the STFK Catholic Institute of Philosophy. This institute provided education for candidates for the priesthood. From 2002 onwards, when the Master of Theology program began, John taught social theology right up until he passed away on 2nd July 2022. John's death had several simultaneous impacts: The Society of the Divine Word (SVD) and IFTK Ledalero lost a charismatic figure and lecturer, the Catholic Church lost an important theologian, and at the same time there was no one with his qualities to replace him.

John was a servant of the truth, with no time for falsehood. As a scholar and a priest, he was a religious missionary who gave his life for the Word. He was a normal, fragile man, but he was someone who was difficult to replace: He was straightforward, authentic and unique. Citing Yudi Latif, the loss of a great scholar leaves a hole in the heart of humanity that cannot be filled until another scholar is born to replace them. This makes sense for someone whose passing is mourned, while being remembered by many.⁹

Besides working as a lecturer, John was a staff member of the Candaditya Centre of Religion and Culture Research. Also, he was a consultant for the Pontifical Council for Culture for 15 years (1993–2008). Another of John's positions was as a member of the editorial boards of *Asian Horizons* (Bangalore, India) from 2014 and *Asian Christian Studies* (Chennai, India) since 2016. He was also very closely involved in the work of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) and at the Roman Synod of Bishops for Asia (1998) he worked in the secretariat and in the press office.¹⁰ He was a lecturer at the Atma Rekha Technical College Ende, from 1990 till 1997. In 1978 he became

⁷ Viator B. Parera, "Bejana Tanah Nan Indah: John M. Prior SVD, Misionaris yang Berupaya Mengarahkan Perubahan," in Budi Kleden/Mirsel, (eds.) *Menerobos Batas-Merobohkan Prasangka*, 175.

⁸ Ibid., 49-50; Abulat et al., *The King's Good Servant*, 43.

⁹ Yudi Latif, "Guru Bangsa Berpulang," *Kompas*, 28 May 2022, 6.

¹⁰ Georg Kirchberger, "Nachruf für Pater John Mansford Prior SVD," in *Verbum SVD* 63:4 (2022) 502-509, 503.

a member of the Archdiocese of Ende Biblical Commission, and was chair of this body from 1988 until 1993. He was a guest lecturer at *Yarra Theological Union, Melbourne, Australia*, from 1999 until 2009, and also a member of the Theological Commission of the Indonesian Bishops' Conference from 1991 till 1994. He was a guest lecturer at STKIP St. Paulus Ruteng (Catechetical Institute) in 1993 and in 1996 at the Fajar Timur Philosophical Institute, Abepura.

In addition to these positions, he was a guest academic at *Melbourne University, Australia*, from 1997 till 2009, then a guest lecturer in 1998 at *Catholic Theological Union, Chicago*. From 2007 to 2009 he was a guest researcher at *Monash University, Australia*. He was an honorary researcher at *Melbourne University of Divinity, Australia* (from 2011), as well as a guest lecturer in the postgraduate program at the Universitas Kristen Maluku (from 2014). John was a teaching staff member at the Asian Theology Forum, Manila (in 2015), and a lecturer in the Renewal Program at East Asian Pastoral Institute, Manila (in 2020).¹¹ Furthermore, John was involved in ecumenical works with various Christian Churches. Three times he conducted an ecumenical course in Bible apostolate for Protestant pastors and Catholic pastors. As long as he was in Maumere, he kept on “pulpit-swapping” with the pastors of the Protestant community in the city.¹²

As an intellectual and a researcher, John was a very productive writer of scientific works and a much sought-after speaker.¹³ This wasn't surprising as he was an avid reader and a progressive thinker. He was an intellectual who had the ability to consider an issue from all angles “with a prophetic attitude, which was critical, creative and innovative.”¹⁴ He wrote seven books, 145 articles in journals, 44 of these were published in two to six languages, 79 chapters in collective work plus another 28 contributions to journal collections. John penned 47 other works (38 in Bahasa Indonesia, eight in English and two in both Bahasa Indonesia and English). In 2020 he contributed to *A History of Christianity in Indonesia*, a tome edited in Utrecht and Jakarta.

In brief, John was a critical and creative teacher. He always gave opportunities to students to think on their own. Consequently, his

¹¹ Budi Kleden/Mirsel, *Menerobos Batas-Merobohkan Prasangka*, 382-383; Monica, *Merambah ke Segala Arah*, 249.

¹² Kirchberger, “Nachruf”, 503.

¹³ Eman Embu, SVD, “Khotbah Misa Pemakaman John Prior, SVD” (*ms.*), Seminari Tinggi St. Paulus Ledalero, 3 July, 2022, 2-3.

¹⁴ Robertus Mirsel, “John Mansford Prior: Merambah ke Segala Arah – Sebuah Catatan Biografis Intelektual,” in Budi Kleden/Mirsel, *Menerobos Batas-Merobohkan Prasangka*, 1.

lectures were always interesting and stimulated lively discussion in the lecture halls. Beyond academia, as a progressive intellectual and religious missionary who was fully committed, the context of his service was focused on the marginalized, the ones socially, economically and politically forgotten in society. The wide variety of his own experiences led him to reflect on his life as a religious missionary and an intellectual in the context of serving the marginalized. This gave him a beautiful dynamic of life which was full of exciting surprises. John once said, “Not many people have opportunities to travel the length and breadth of the world, except missionaries who proclaim the mission *ad extra*, mission *ad altera*, *in altum*, and *ad vitam*, graced by vision, experience and a global/local approach.”¹⁵

The Prophetic Life of John Prior

In the context of his option for the marginalized, John was critical of clergy who prioritized rituals and sat on thrones of the establishment, while at the same time they ignored the reality of the world which was stamped with poverty. In the midst of poverty, John criticized the lifestyle of some priests who saw themselves as little kings basking in the glory of their high social status. In that role they were not servants, but rather the ones whom others served. This could be seen in a reluctance to visit parishioners just because of lack of transport.¹⁶ Often priests saw their work as a career which enabled them to be materially well-off. This resulted in them being easily swept away by the temptation to make themselves and their families wealthy. In fact, though, a person who opted for the priesthood should have been ready to put a certain distance between themselves and their family, and be united with the people whom they served, especially the little ones and the marginalized.¹⁷

John’s criticism didn’t just target individual priests (*ad hominem*, *ad personam*), but also segments of the institutional church which tended to compromise. The uniqueness of John was his courage to

¹⁵ Monica, *Merambah ke Segala Arah*, 74.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 49, 60-61.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 61, 98. While stationed at St. Thomas Morus Parish, John was deeply impressed by the simplicity of the lifestyle of his parish priest, Fr. Lipus Loi Riwu. A diocesan priest who did not take a vow of poverty, Fr. Lipus loved his vocation which he lived out on par with his parishioners. Prior, “Mengenang RD. Philipus Loi Riwu,” 58.

speak in a culture of silence, a culture of mediocrity, a culture not concerned for the uncertainties and worries of the poor.¹⁸

His option for the marginalized wasn't only in a prophetic context of auto-criticism of the church which existed in the general poverty of the Sikka Regency. It also was expressed concretely in his involvement with those on the fringe of society. His own lifestyle was very simple. He practiced what he preached, and he was never carried away by banal popular trends. He didn't build divisive walls. He didn't use his priesthood as a means of gaining status.¹⁹ He was truly at one with the marginalized. Regarding his lifestyle, Eman Embu said:

In his daily life he was an ascetic, a long way from luxury and privilege. He set himself a high standard in the way he practiced his religious vows. Any income, including Mass stipends, went into the community. He kept exact financial records. He didn't have a private bank account. He didn't own his own transport.²⁰

For John, living out his option for the poor meant eliminating a narrow way of thinking while demonstrating a way of thinking and a way of life truly in solidarity with Catholic teaching.²¹ That solidarity meant being brave enough to leave one's comfort zone and live with the little ones and those suffering. Without this awareness, a priest could easily cling to a state of privilege, and might even turn against the poor and victims of injustice. In a world that was so divided and in which the poor were isolated authentic preaching of the Gospel that was truly authentic was the witness of one's life. A life focused on having an option for the marginalized meant not being identified with material priorities, but rather trying to dismantle what could separate an evangelist from the little ones. On this basis, the spirit and practice of evangelization could transform the life of the needy.²² As a prophet with a simple lifestyle, John promoted the creation of a society which did not prioritize prosperity and the pursuit of comfort. Such a society would be transformative. In it, people who would strive to raise up humanity,

¹⁸ Hsu Monica, *Merambah ke Segala Arah*, 110-114, 124, 129-133.

¹⁹ Parera, "Bejana Tanah Nan Indah", 176-177.

²⁰ Embu, "Khotbah Misa", 4.

²¹ John Mansford Prior, "Cabut Pohon, Geser Gunung: Peran STFK Ledalero dalam Dunia Teknokratik," in Paul Budi Kleden and Otto Gusti Madung (eds.), *Menukik lebih Dalam: Kenangan 40 Tahun STFK Ledalero*, Maumere: Penerbit Ledalero 2009, 36.

²² John Mansford Prior, "Tantangan Perkembangan Zaman dan Jawaban Profetis yang Dituntut dari Kaum Religius," Georg Kirchberger and John Mansford Prior (eds.), *Mengendus Jejak Allah, Dialog Dengan Masyarakat Pinggir*, Volume I, Printing I, Ende: Nusa Indah 1997, 116-117.

would prioritize the little ones, would leave their comfort zones and security.²³

Transformative Theology

As a professor, John strived to free his students from those hidden chains which often restrained them from expanding their vision. At the same time, he helped them to read the signs of the times, to think freely and to look at alternatives in the context of constant change.²⁴ Thus, the theology he taught wasn't clerical, made up of definitions that came down from above for the purpose of strengthening the institutional church. The theology he taught wasn't about a boring God, and didn't create an attitude of apathy or fear.²⁵

John presented a theology that was transformative. It was a new way of theologizing using a practical contextual approach. He started with the joys and concerns of society's victims. This approach directed a person to immerse themselves into contextual theology so that they had the ability to use their power of reasoning while at the same time they could evangelize the marginalized and be able to read the signs of the times from their perspective.²⁶

John used this method in the lectures in his Socio-political Theology program. Firstly, he divided the students into small "plunge" groups. Each group was plunged into a marginalized section of society at least ten times. It was not intended that these groups would bring theological ideas to the people with whom they were involved. They did not come as teachers. On the contrary, the students came to see the reality of these people's lives first hand. Then the students analyzed problems that they had found in the field and looked at possible ways of resolving these. It was hoped that in this way the students would be inspired and converted by the little people so that they could renew themselves and their viewpoints so that they would have greater empathy for those at the bottom rung of society. "We were the ones who raised their awareness of their special vocation that is to lift themselves out of the depths of slavery assisted by 'our companion on the journey' namely

²³ Mgr. Edwaldus Martinus Sedu, "Sejarah, Jejak Langkah dan Jembatan Kemanusiaan: Teladan 'Tolak Tunduk' Pastor John Mansford Prior SVD", in Monica, *Merambah ke Segala Arah*, 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

²⁵ Prior, "Cabut Pohon, Geser Gunung", 32.

²⁶ John Mansford Prior, "Berteologi Dalam Konteks: Sekitar *Orthoakousis*, *Orthopraxis* dan *Orthodoxi*," *Jurnal Ledalero*, 3:1 (2004) 71.

the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Moses, Aaron and Miriam, the God of Jesus of Nazareth.”²⁷

In this way, John stressed that theology must be transformative and empowering. Theology didn't sit on a throne, but its purpose was to empower humanity and to give hope to the marginalized. For John, this was a vocation and purpose not rooted in status, position or prestige. The two groups of marginalized people who were particularly special for him became the reference point for Socio-political Theology. John processed his experience with them, then used this as his lecture material, encouraging them to in turn process the material and process it based on their own personal experience.²⁸

John emphasized that every theoretical consideration must bear fruit in human experience. Claims of truth in the domain of orthodoxy must be tested in real life. Likewise human experience needs to be processed and reflected upon to form a framework for clear thinking. John saw idealism/theory and the human reality as being two sides of the one coin, both needing each other. Theology taught in the lecture hall had to be illumined by real life, data and the social situation. Sensitivity was essential re involvement with the marginalized who had become victims of social discrimination. John put this into practice.²⁹ Via social theology John eliminated any egoism of his own to build up egalitarian and just social relationships. For him, theology wasn't constructed as a safe house, but rather as an open space filled with challenges and risks.³⁰

Several effects of transformative theology, theology which “plunges” into the midst of the world, is that it is inspired by the perspective of the little ones, the marginalized.³¹ *Firstly*, one effect is that it opens oneself to the presence of God in a particular community and situation. This means that different kinds of prayers and religious rituals which are formed in a particular religious community don't result in someone being caught up in their own egoism. In other words, religious identity doesn't cause someone to fall into extreme ritualism which turns them in on themselves and their own community. Following on from this,

²⁷ Prior, “Cabut Pohon, Geser Gunung”, 39. John started immersion experiences in 2002 when he was running a postgraduate course in Sociology–Political Theology at STFK Ledalero. Monica, *Merambah ke Segala Arah*, 64.

²⁸ Monica, *Merambah ke Segala Arah*, 87.

²⁹ Mirsel/Prior, 5-6.

³⁰ Alexander Dancar, “Teologi Sosial dan Provokasi Melawan Penjinakan,” in Budi Kleden/Mirsel, *Menerobos Batas-Merobohkan Prasangka*, 321-322.

³¹ For the following pages see Prior, “Berteologi Dalam Konteks,” 80-87.

such rites and spiritual practices can make people feel anxious with what they experience in the wider community, particularly when they are under threat. Our prayer must favor those prone to be victims.

Secondly, another effect relates to the theological conversation as a whole, because it evolves from social experience. This means that contextual theology has its roots in issues experienced by society, either joyful or sad. Its main focus is on solidarity with the marginalized rather than intellectual discussion. Because of this those involved in it must be living closely to/with the marginalized. Together, the joys, hopes, sadness and worries of the people are taken seriously as contextual theology happens in a specific environment.

Thirdly, plurality is accepted. When a particular religious community wants to do theology in a social context, which is multicultural, a nonnegotiable condition is to avoid all forms of exclusivity such as tribalism/small group centeredness. Cultural pluralism must be celebrated. Thus, in the midst of a community that accepts diversity and avoids the opinion that there is just one way of doing things, a person and their work can develop. Each person living in an open community is able in the same manner in the broad society.

The *fourth point* is ongoing transformation. Someone who theologizes contextually is a person who is able to understand a context and delve into it in an orderly fashion. A context is always both global and local. Practically speaking, in life, these are one. What is meant here is that the act of involvement is always open to culture in its entirety, including politics, economy and gender. Not only this, though, for to theologize contextually is to develop a transformative and egalitarian relationship between lecturer and student, *civitas academica* and the faithful and the community at large. This can happen if the walls of status that cause division are broken down. Certainly, this is also assisted by a process of formation which is appropriate, taking into account a sufficient psychological sexual maturity.

The *fifth point* is an ability to act prophetically. Based on faith in Christ, a true theologian will always sensitively be conscious of the context of life and work which empowers a person to be on the side of the weak. A contextual theologian gives life to a critical prophetic spirit, questioning and looking into those basic problems which are experienced in the real life of ordinary people. With faith in Christ, if not in a synchronous way, at least there are certain people who believe they are called to challenge beliefs and take responsibility for their beliefs. They wrestle with the theological values behind the problems of a fragmented society, and they take theological risks in their social context. The call to be a prophet like this can come to light when a person is able to be at peace with themselves.

The *sixth point* is establishing a common commitment. A contextual theological approach which has its origins below can be successful if the way of life of individuals and the community is on the level of the little people. Thus, the church, which tends to sit on a throne of security and in which the faithful prioritize the rituals of private piety, is challenged not to forget the marginalized. This will take place if there is a common commitment in a community which is outside the routine of its individual members. A community and its prayer life can be enriched and the process of doing theology can get a clear color, if that commitment is concretized via the struggle of humanity or the preservation of the natural environment for a specific time.

The *seventh point*: embracing the community of the faithful. Theological reflections can interpret what is being experienced in society as a whole when a theologian works in tandem with the community of the faithful. In other words, a theological reflection truly expresses the faith of the people when the theologian doesn't monopolize the task of involvement and common struggle, but rather empowers the faithful who are involved with it. The faithful are not just males, but include all genders without discrimination. Thus, with the involvement of all the community of the faithful, the struggle to honor the rights of the marginalized can become a collective movement which is more effective.

John's Option for the Marginalized in Maumere

Flores-Plus Peer Support Group

Recognizing the fact that victims of HIV/AIDS are stigmatized and discriminated against in society at large, Dr Asep Purnama, Mr Mateus da Silva, Mr Max Mitan, and a group of people living with HIV/AIDS formed the Flores-Plus Peer Support Group, which officially came into being on 6th December 2006. This group endeavors to network, serve, and care for people living with HIV/AIDS. They are a body open to anyone who cares for the victims of HIV/AIDS and their circle.³²

³² Servinus H. Nahak, *Bongkar Kedok Stigma: Membaca Injil di Tengah Krisis AIDS*, Maumere: Penerbit Ledalero 2019, 71-72; Rasdina Rovigis and Servinus Haryanto Nahak (eds.), *Bangkit dalam Harapan Baru. Curahan Hati Sesama Kita yang Hidup dengan HIV: 25 Penyintas HIV Berbagi Kisahnya, Volume I*, Maumere: Penerbit Ledalero 2017, 149-150; Asep Purnama, "Penanganan Kasus HIV dan AIDS di Rumah sakit Umum. Daerah TC. Hillers Maumere selama 2005–2015," *Jurnal Ledalero*, 14:2 (2015) 233-234.

Once a month, they meet and discuss their problems and issues relating to health, their livelihood and their families. They talk about issues connected with the stigma they are living with in society. These meetings are also opportunities for mutual support and positive motivation.³³ These monthly meetings finish with Bible Sharing. John used to prepare the materials for the Bible Sharing. He divided those present into groups. A Scripture text was read then reflected upon. Based on the sharing of the group, one of the members would summarize the points raised. Then they would share their own life experiences, both happy and sad, the memories of which were triggered by the sharing.³⁴

For John, the mental strengthening of those living with HIV/AIDS through Bible Sharing complemented their medication which took place regularly. Certainly, John's input always made those present stop and think, and possibly be surprised, as he encouraged them to come back to life and not despair. This sharing didn't just have a positive impact on the group members, but also on John himself. It helped him to read the Bible with the eyes of the marginalized. John wasn't interested in complicated theological jargon. He wanted the Bible to be read and understood simply and deeply by those on the fringes of society.³⁵ He confessed that he learnt so much from ordinary folk who had never studied the Bible but read it in their own context.³⁶ A biblical text's meaning wasn't interpreted in a rigid way but was based on an exegesis rooted in real, ordinary life.³⁷

John's presence and activities among people living with HIV/AIDS was solely because they were his priority. He wanted to hear their problems and also their optimism regarding life. At the same time, he gave them hope which looked towards a bright future. The world which was at times unjust, which pushed aside the weak, was brightened by John's presence. The broken-hearted were given hope which enabled them to rise again, and also have the courage to cross the challenging oceans they faced.

³³ Rovigis/Nahak (eds.), *Bangkit dalam Harapan Baru*, 152; Nahak, *Bongkar Kedok Stigma*, 74.

³⁴ Nahak, *Bongkar Kedok Stigma*, 74; Monica, Merambah ke Segala Arah, 193-194. Since 2009, with Fr. Eman Pine, John Prior was involved with the people living with HIV/AIDS group as a mentor. When Fr. Eman was transferred to Jakarta, John took his position, providing a monthly Mass for the group. Monica, *Merambah ke Segala Arah*, 86-87.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

³⁶ John Mansford Prior, *Menjebol Jeruji Prasangka: Membaca Alkitab Dengan Jiwa*, Maumere: Penerbit Ledalero 2010, 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

The biblical texts prepared and seriously reflected upon by John at the times of sharing were intended to ring alarm bells in the community, as they were reminders that via the Divine Word, God was present in everyone, slowly but surely renewing a world which set up barriers between the weak and the strong, the poor and the rich. Via the Word, “every evangelist must place themselves in such a way that change, growth and transformation take place, not directly and often unexpectedly, and often in an unplanned way, even outside the circle and imagination of the evangelist or the community.”³⁸

An evangelist like John didn’t demand a radical and total form of repentance. In the name of the Gospel, the struggle to conscientize the public re the stigmatization and discrimination of people living with HIV/AIDS as an ongoing social construction was truly an endless task. To break down the barriers experienced by these victims a strong commitment was demanded. In brief, the presence and involvement of John in the circle of people living with HIV/AIDS gave them great hope. He himself said:

Thus, in the midst of our world which is torn to pieces, there is a ray of hope... our mission is to connect unuttered prayer and apostolic work which is very much vocal, promoting justice and peace. Our task is to strengthen those bonds between individuals who are isolated from one another, joining scattered fibres of the fabric of society. By linking those who are fragile at the fringes... we participate in creating and defending these groups.³⁹

Prisoners in the Maumere Jail

John’s option for the marginalized led him to become involved over many years with the inmates of Maumere’s jail. He was their spiritual director and motivator. He celebrated Mass at the jail every week and regularly led Bible Sharing meetings there.⁴⁰ His sermons in the jail were always down to earth. Influenced by his own sociological perspective, his sermons were always interesting and featured new ideas. As well as giving motivation and encouragement to the prisoners he touched all their hearts. They felt that he respected them.⁴¹

³⁸ John Mansford Prior, *Berdiri di Ambang Batas: Pergumulan Seputar Iman dan Budaya*, Maumere: Penerbit Ledalero 2008, viii.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁴⁰ Monica, *Merambah ke Segala Arah*, 217-236.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 222, 227, 235-236.

The Bible Sharing in jail followed the same pattern as the sharing he carried out with the people living with HIV/AIDS, using biblical background and sociological interpretation. As well as reading and reflecting on the Scriptures, the prisoners were encouraged to identify with biblical characters. In this way they began to read the biblical stories from the perspective of chosen figures. They developed an ability to enter into the reality of the Bible one step at a time. They learnt to participate in the life of the biblical figures so that they could feel at one with these. Afterwards, they were invited to share their own current life experiences. Then finally they compiled a number of stories and texts which were relevant to them personally.⁴²

John saw how important Bible Sharing was for the prisoners, and what a great healing power it was. He once wrote:

Bible Sharing has the power to shake up and to liberate. It can eliminate illusions and wipe away fears so that the wounds of the past can be healed and those participating in the sharing are able to face themselves with confidence. Someone can be overwhelmed by difficulties and mental challenges, but Bible Sharing can sow new, therapeutic seeds which heal and restore and can rebuild relationships.⁴³

As well as facilitating Bible Sharing in the jail, John encouraged prisoners to read the Scriptures intellectually. In 2008, he connected them with a professional Bible Study group in Belgium. Members of this group were different from the prisoners in Maumere who were mainly little people with a strong cultural identity. The Belgians were full-time pastoral workers and some who had no connection at all with the institutional church. Some were married, while others were in relationships not recognized by civil or church authorities. They lived in a secular world. Both groups read and reflected upon the passage John 8:1-11. Then they shared their responses with “their partners on the other side of the world.” After this they all read the text again, letting their different perspectives influence them. John facilitated the sharing of responses, using a method of intercultural reading of the Scriptures. The individual groups shared independently, then shared the results of this, and finally reflected on the sharing together. As a result, both groups were drawn to challenge their own prejudices while questioning critically matters to do with faith, society, culture and politics. This cross-border sharing enabled liberation, self-renewal and personal confidence building to take place. As a facilitator, John was

⁴² Ibid., 218; Prior, *Menjebol Jeruji Prasangka*, 15, 19.

⁴³ Ibid., 18-19.

very much aware that when he heard these two very different groups sharing from very different perspectives, using biblical theological interpretations, he himself needed to “read with a spirit that came from the heart.”⁴⁴

John was much loved by the prisoners, who saw him as someone who really was at one with them. He talked with them, heart to heart, and they felt at ease sharing with him about their suffering behind bars. Sometimes he was so overcome by what was shared with him that he could not hold back his tears.⁴⁵ John always interpreted Gospel passages in light of what the prisoners spoke of. The process of sharing empowered him to fire up the spirit of the prisoners, encouraging them to accept their hard situation in the jail while not easily giving in to despair.⁴⁶

Even though what he did was appreciated, he was criticized for making the jail his *de facto* special place of ministry.⁴⁷ However, while *de iure* he was never appointed prison chaplain, *de facto* John always was in communication with the Parish Priest of St. Thomas Morus Parish—the jail is located within the geographical boundary of the parish—and had permission to say Mass and conduct the Bible Sharing programs in the jail.⁴⁸

John’s attitude towards the prisoners was the same as it was towards the people living with HIV/AIDS. He entered into their lives, while at the same time he endeavored to break down the walls of discrimination and social stigmatization. Social constraints created by society often sentenced people twice. They were condemned to spend a time in incarceration, and they were condemned by society who stigmatized them. By his presence and involvement he showed that prisoners don’t have to be marginalized. Negativity slowly but surely changed by John’s action. Prisoners had to be given hope that a better world awaited them after serving their time inside. Prisoners needed to be motivated so that they wouldn’t give in to negativity and despair.

John didn’t go into the jail to preach to the prisoners or to be in a superior position to them. He wanted to motivate them and build up a

⁴⁴ Ibid., 27-39.

⁴⁵ Monica, *Merambah ke Segala Arah*, 219.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 236.

⁴⁷ The results of a discussion with Fr. Hubert Thomas Hasulie, SVD, Professor IFTK Ledalero and Candraditya Research Centre, 23 January 2023, at IFTK Ledalero.

⁴⁸ Expression of thanks at Mass, 40 days after John’s death at St. Thomas Morus Parish. The results of a discussion with Fr. Laurensius Noi, Parish Priest, St. Thomas Morus Parish, 2 February 2023.

spirit of optimism so that they could open a new chapter in their book of life, closing the former chapter which had passed its use-by date. He had become one of them. There was no demarcation of status between the prisoners and John.⁴⁹ This was a strategy or more accurately a means which he used to reconstruct the hierarchical pyramid of the church which was controlled by an elite at the top: The ideal church for John was a *communio*, where compassion took root and flourished.⁵⁰

John promoted this model of action among his students both in the lecture hall and by inviting them to join him in the jail. When mixing with the prisoners, the students were instructed not to use theories and complicated theological ideas, but to listen to the prisoners' stories and in the end be "converted" by them. The hidden value in humbly doing this, according to John, was an important learning experience. He said, "*in seminary we learn about Scripture, in prison we experience how the Scriptures imbue renewed hope and possibility.*"⁵¹ Clearly and undeniably, John wanted everyone to be evangelized not to evangelize, to be taught not to teach. There was no room for pride in the person of an evangelist because such a dimension was not compatible with the teaching of the Gospel.⁵²

Regarding the importance of humility in the presence of the marginalized such as prisoners, John stressed that many people work in the face of tyranny which is truly evil, in the midst of the destruction of individuals, communities, languages and fragile cultures. He said, "a humble, prophetic heart is needed to be evangelized by the victims in society, and to be able to live in the midst of death and destruction."⁵³

Conclusion

John took his calling to serve those on the fringe of society very seriously. He saw this as his responsibility, demanded by the Gospel for the followers of Jesus, especially those committed to the religious life. For him, those with a religious vocation weren't called to give precedence to liturgical piety. Prayers and rituals should not enslave a

⁴⁹ Monica, *Merambah ke Segala Arah*, 235-236.

⁵⁰ Parera, "Bejana Tanah Nan Indah"

⁵¹ Prior, 1968: "The Year of Mounting Lucidity," 20.

⁵² Monica, *Merambah ke Segala Arah*, 57; Prior, "Cabut Pohon, Geser Gunung," 20.

⁵³ Prior, *Berdiri di Ambang Batas*, 145.

person to an individual piety, a kind of religious safety net. Prayer must sensitize a religious person to the needs of the marginalized, those victimized by society. Rites and prayers should ideally be the fruit of being at one with the poor and suffering.

The most obvious result of making an option for the marginalized and disenfranchised is the formation of a personality that is integral and complete. John knew this, so he became involved with the poor not primarily to evangelize them, but to listen to them. In his opinion, an evangelist must be a listener because the context of the message is always dialogical. Because of this, an evangelist and the context in which they work contribute to a process of mutual learning. If not the Gospel of Jesus which is intended to be something that upsets, and causes change in society and the transformation of society, facilitating a true *metanoia* of the individual and society, will not happen.⁵⁴

On this basis, a logical and ethical consequence for a priest is the immersion in the life of society. The paradigm of holiness which can only be attained by prayer and carrying out liturgical rituals is one which must change. Holiness can't be imprisoned in a chapel or temple. On the contrary, holiness can only be attained by a priest if he takes the brave step of stepping outside of his comfort zone, goes outside of the curtain of the temple, and becomes truly involved in struggles of the faithful. Thus, "the joys and hopes, the sorrows and the anxieties of the present time, especially the poor and suffering become the joys, hopes, sorrows and anxieties of the followers of Jesus too."⁵⁵

John was the prototype of a faithful priest who left his comfort zone to meet and dialogue with the marginalized. Such a meeting and such dialogue didn't result in a drastic or significant change but what did happen was that some marginalized persons were helped to become people who knew they had dignity and were valued. John's option for the poor was a criticism of political power, religion and society in general. He presented a challenge to give priority to serving the poor as subjects, not as objects to be manipulated.

Interviews:

Fr. Hubert Thomas Hasulie, SVD, Professor IFTK Ledalero and Candraditya Research Centre, 23 January 2023, IFTK Ledalero.

Fr. Laurensius Noi, Parish Priest, St. Thomas Morus Parish, 2 February 2023, presbytery St. Thomas Morus Parish.

⁵⁴ Ibid., vii.

⁵⁵ GS 1.

ABSTRACTS

Ein Priester sollte in das Leben der Gläubigen eingebunden sein, denn diese Einbindung ist der Grundgedanke der priesterlichen Berufung und gleichzeitig die Essenz der Botschaft des Evangeliums, die er verkündet. Dieser Artikel erläutert das Modell des Priestertums, wie es im Leben von John Mansford Prior SVD, einem Priester der Gesellschaft des Göttlichen Wortes, zum Ausdruck kommt. John Priors Option für die Ausgegrenzten war wirklich inspiriert von und die Verkörperung der Theologie, die er im Hörsaal lehrte, nämlich der transformativen Theologie. Es handelte sich dabei um eine neue Art, Theologie zu betreiben, die sich einer praktischen, kontextbezogenen Methode bediente, nämlich „mit den Hoffnungen und Prüfungen der Opfer in der Gesellschaft zu beginnen“. John Priors Option drückte sich in seinem eigenen einfachen Lebensstil aus, aber auch in seiner konstruktiven Kritik an der Kirche und insbesondere am Verhalten „einer Handvoll“ von Priestern auf Flores, die sich nicht um das Schicksal eines großen Teils der Gläubigen kümmerten, denen sie zu dienen berufen waren. Die Option von John Prior drückte sich in seinem Engagement für die Menschen am Rande der Gesellschaft aus, insbesondere für die HIV/AIDS-Opfer und die Inhaftierten in Maumere.

Un sacerdote debe implicarse en la vida de los fieles porque tal implicación es el espíritu básico de la vocación sacerdotal y, al mismo tiempo, es la esencia del mensaje evangélico que predica. Este artículo elabora el modelo de sacerdocio expresado en la vida de John Mansford Prior SVD, un sacerdote de la Sociedad del Verbo Divino. La opción de John Prior por los marginados se inspiró verdaderamente en la teología que enseñaba en el aula, a saber, la teología transformadora, y fue su encarnación. Se trataba de una nueva forma de hacer teología que utilizaba un método práctico y contextual, a saber, “partir de las esperanzas y pruebas de las víctimas de la sociedad”. La opción de John Prior se expresaba en su propio estilo de vida sencillo y también en su crítica constructiva a la Iglesia y, en particular, al comportamiento de “un puñado” de sacerdotes de Flores que no se preocupaban por la suerte de una gran parte de los fieles a los que estaban llamados a servir. La opción de John Prior se manifestó en su compromiso con los marginados de la sociedad, especialmente las víctimas del VIH/SIDA y los encarcelados de Maumere.

Un prêtre devrait être impliqué dans la vie des fidèles parce que cet engagement constitue l'esprit de base d'une vocation sacerdotale et, en même temps, est l'essence du message évangélique qu'il prêche. Cet article élabore le modèle de prêtrise tel qu'exprimé dans la vie de John Mansford Prior, SVD, ministre ordonné de la Société du Verbe Divin. L'option de John Prior pour les marginalisés fut vraiment inspirée par la théologie qu'il enseignait dans ses cours – la théologie transformante – et sa concrétisation. C'était une nouvelle façon de faire de la théologie qui utilisait une méthode d'approche pratique contextuelle : « commencer par les espoirs et tribulations des victimes de la société ». L'option de John Prior se reflétait dans son style de vie simple et aussi dans sa critique constructive de l'Église, en particulier du comportement d'une « poignée » de prêtres à Florès qui ne se souciaient pas du sort d'un grand nombre de fidèles qu'ils étaient appelés à servir. L'option de John Prior s'exprimait dans son engagement avec ceux qui étaient aux franges de la société, particulièrement les victimes du Sida et les prisonniers à Maumere.