

**INSTITUTE OF SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGIOUS FORMATION**

**TANGAZA COLLEGE**

**THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA**

**SR.VALENTINA YUVENSI, SCIC**

**DISCIPLESHIP OF THE SISTERS OF CHARITY OF THE  
IMMACULATE CONCEPTION IN THE LIGHT OF MARK 8:34-38**

Supervisor

**Rev. Fr. Ambrose Mutinda, CSSp.**

**NAIROBI**

**November 2004**

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
A long Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Diploma in Spirituality and Religious Formation.

**NAIROBI**

**November 2004**

**DECLARATION**

I, the undersigned, declare that this thesis is my original work and has never been submitted to any college or university for academic credit. Any information from other sources has been duly acknowledged.

Signature: .....

Name: Sr. Valentina Yuvensi, SCIC.

Date: *26 November 2004*.....

This thesis has been submitted with my approval as the supervisor.

Signature:..... .....

Name: Fr. Ambrose Mutinda, CSSp.

Date: ..... *26 - 11 - 2004*.....

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to the Trinitarian God and the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I praise and thank Almighty God for the gift of life and His everlasting love to me.

I would like to extend my profound gratitude to my congregation; mother general Sr. Grasia R. Rossi, the provincial superior Sr. Raffaella Franzin and her counselors, my community members and all sisters who are accompanying me on my life journey.

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May God Bless you all.

## **GENERAL INTRODUCTION**

### **0.1 The Purpose of the Thesis**

The purpose of the following study is to present the basic foundation of discipleship that has been laid down by Jesus in the New Testament from the beginning of the Church. The main focus is to explain the call to follow Jesus as disciples as Mark portrayed it powerfully in his Gospel. This thesis aims at illustrating the discipleship of the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception in regard to Mark 8:34-38. It is profoundly focused upon animating a zealous response to discipleship in all stages and states of life.

### **0.2 Rationale of the Thesis**

Through this study, I have acknowledged the background in which the Gospel of Mark was written. There was persecution and martyrdom that Christians faced in order to become true disciples of Christ. I have gained more knowledge about the call to discipleship, the charism and the discipleship of the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception.

### **0.3 Central Question**

This study investigates at some length, the meaning of following Christ, becoming His true disciples and embracing discipleship up to the point of losing one's life. It investigates the discipleship of the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception and how every baptised person is involved in discipleship.

### **0.4 Methodological Consideration**

This research will use the methodological approach applied in the Institute of Spirituality and Religious Life in Tangaza College, namely, the foundational, dialogical and integration method.

**Foundational Aspect** The research puts forward a formational element of human experience; say, from a lived formation event or a specific experience of the author or of other

people. The research then proceeds to disclose, identify and elucidate the formative foundation structure, dimensions and dynamics that are universal and can be experienced by others in a similar formation situation.

**Dialogical Aspect** The universal statements thus far disclosed are engaged in dialogue with the theories and principles of discipline, with insights from other disciplines and the experience of other authors.

**Integration Aspect** All the findings and insights disclosed are integrated into a new body of knowledge that is applied to a particular formation segment in order to test its probability, foundationality and applicability. It investigates and clarifies the meaning, the nature and destiny of discipleship in all states of life. Radical following of Christ and faith in Him is the heart of discipleship.

## **0.5 Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter deals with discipleship in Mark 8:34-38. It explains the meaning of discipleship, the originality of the call, the requirements for becoming a disciple and the promise that Jesus made to whoever wishes to follow Him. The central theme of the passage includes the radical following of Christ, denying of oneself for the sake of Christ and the Gospel, taking up of the cross, proclamation of the Gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit and the challenges encountered in discipleship.

The second chapter deals with discipleship of the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception, the need for re-evangelization and the historical background of the foundress Mother Antonia Maria Verna. It explains the name of the congregation and the charism. It introduces who Mary is, her role in the work salvation and Mary Immaculate as the model of discipleship of the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception. Finally, it talks about discipleship in our Consecrated Life.

The third chapter, deals with how Mark 8:34-38 illuminates the discipleship of the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception as the model and source of strength.

## CHAPTER I

### DISCIPLESHIP IN MARK 8:34-38

#### 1.0 Introduction

From the historical background of the early Christian Church, we come to know the situation in which our main sources of faith have been written, namely 'the Gospels'. It is believed that Mark's Gospel was the first to be written, most probably around "60A.D to 75 A.D"<sup>1</sup>, just after the time of the Roman Emperor Nero who ruled from 54 A.D to 58 A.D<sup>2</sup>. At that period, overwhelming persecutions and death for the sake of Christ and the Gospel faced the Christians. In that terrible situation, Mark wrote his Gospel to deepen the faith of the members of his community. He aimed at teaching who Jesus was (Mark 1-8:27), that Jesus was Messiah (Mark 8:28-38) and a suffering Messiah (8:31-16:8). Whoever wants to follow Him has to share fully in His life and mission. For this reason he strongly stressed the meaning and the demands of discipleship. Mark pointed out the importance of being rooted in Christ and becoming His true followers, thus called to share the very destiny of his Master, to carry His cross (Mark 8:34), to drink His cup (Mark 10:38), and finally to receive from Him, the kingdom (Mark 8:38, Matt. 19:28-29). Mark in his gospel developed the wonderful theme of discipleship and presented its demands. This is the theme that I wish to talk about, focusing on chapter 8:34-38. Mark's Gospel is very challenging and powerful for all times. It gives guidance in radical decision-making, it illuminates and strengthens our Christian faith as individuals and as a congregation.

#### 1.2 Definition of Discipleship

The etymology of the word disciple is from the Greek, "Mathētēs" which means a learner, a student, a follower.

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<sup>1</sup> R.E.BROWN, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 127

<sup>2</sup> THE READERS DIGEST ASSOCIATION., *Great Encyclopedia Dictionary*, 908.

However, in the New Testament is frequently used as to walk behind, to follow<sup>3</sup>. The frequent use of this word in the New Testament indicates a specialized term for following Jesus closely. Hence, I could define discipleship as the state of life that expresses a deep relationship with Jesus.

Bonhoeffer defines Discipleship as: “adherence to Christ, and, because Christ is the object of that adherence, it must take the form of discipleship”<sup>4</sup>. Discipleship is the state of entering into Jesus’ culture, which is *pure love*. Hence, the life of a disciple should be incarnated into that pure love until one can dare to say *it is no longer I, but it is Christ who lives in me* (Gal 2:20). Discipleship in true sense is an invitation to enter and embrace the Paschal Mystery.

## 1.2 The Main Characteristics of discipleship in Mark

There are some basic elements that have to be owned by the one who is called to follow Jesus as a disciple. Jesus is the one who invites a person to follow Him. He points out clearly the requirements and He promises the dignity and destiny of His follower. This treasure of the divine call is well portrayed by the evangelist as we shall see in the following passages.

### 1.3.i. Jesus’ Initiative

Indeed the call comes from Jesus. It is Jesus who decides who is to be called. Right from the beginning of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus calls with authority: *and said to them; come after me and I will make you fishers of men* (Mark 1:17). Jesus call touches the heart of a person and molds it to respond generously (Luke 5:1-11; John 1:35-42). The synoptic Gospels present to us Jesus who went to the hills, spending the night in prayer (Luke 6:12), that he could call the twelve disciples (Mark 3:13-15; Matt 10:1-4; Luke 6:12-16). He reminds us of the twelve tribes of Israel at the Mount Sinai, who will become the foundation of the New Israel (Exod.24:4ff). They were to be with Him and to be formed for the mission (Mark 3:14-15). A call to follow Jesus is

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<sup>3</sup> D.N. FREEDMAN., *Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. II, 207.

<sup>4</sup> D. BONHOEFFER., *The Cost of Discipleship*, 63.

a divine gift, which flows from God's plan of creation and salvation. It bears abundant fruits of transformation, repentance and believing in God (Mark 1:15), and finally to be sent to the whole world to proclaim the Good News, baptize and make disciples (Matt 28:19-20).

### **1.3. ii. Requirement and Promise**

Our God from the beginning approaches His people in a friendly and loving way. His creation was beautiful as we read from Genesis; *God looked at everything He had made and He found it very good* (Gen 1:31). After the fall of man, God wishes to involve people in His salvific plan. Nevertheless He wants a free person from within. Abraham, the father of the chosen nation was asked to leave his country and go where God wanted. He was called to break from family bonds, possessions and the country of his ancestors and begin an entirely new life in a foreign land. This vigorous response to God's call privileged him to become a spiritual father of faith and obedience to all believers who continue to trust in God even when their situation seems to offer no hope (Exod 12:1-20). That is the nature of the faith, which was given greatly to Mary Immaculate, who stands at the beginning of the New Testament, shining with her splendid faith as a model of every disciple of Jesus. Faith in God is like a power or catalyst for the acceptance of God's will in obedience. Its fruits are joy, understanding, total commitment, love and the ability to self-sacrifice.

Jesus Christ, the central figure of the New Testament, reveals what is required for becoming His disciple and the destiny of discipleship. He compares his life with that of animals; *Foxes have dens and birds of sky have nets, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest His head* (Luke 9:58; Matt 8:20). This indicates a total detachment and dependence on God's providence. It is a remarkable sign of Religious Life through all ages.

In one's life, first priority should be given to God and His mission; family ties have nothing to do with Jesus' call for Jesus Himself says; *let the dead bury their dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God* (Luke 9:60; Matt 8:22). Following Christ therefore, is a forward

struggling, because “*no one who looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God* (Luke, 9:62).

Jesus in His journey towards Jerusalem reveals Himself as a Son of Man, who is to be rejected, will suffer, die and on the third day rise (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). After each of these predictions, His disciples misunderstood His messiahship and therefore, also their discipleship (Mark 8:32; 9:33-34,38; 10:35-37). In response to each misunderstanding, Jesus clarifies the nature of discipleship, that it demands following after Him in trust, even to death (Mark 8:34-38; 9:35-37, 39-41; 10:38-45).

In one of the predictions, Jesus took His disciples side and begun to tell them what would happen to Him (Mark 8:31-32). Peter took Jesus aside and begun to rebuke Him, Jesus in turn rebuked Peter and said “get behind me Satan”. Peter expresses the incorrect understanding of Jesus’ messiahship; anyone who denies the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus stands on the side of “Satan” (Matt 4:10), is opposed to God’s design of the plan of salvation. Also by calling Peter “Satan” Jesus indicates that the false views of His Messiahship is a temptation (Job 1-2; Zech.3:1-2). In other words to go against the ways of Jesus is to go against the will of God, and one who is against God is Satan. A human being tends to misunderstand the logic of God. A disciple’s place is behind, because he is a follower.

The reward that Jesus promises to His disciples is to share His life, and mission, to be fishers of men (Mark 1:20), to gain a hundred times family members, possessions but not without persecution (Mark 10:30).

### **1.3.iii Positive Response to Discipleship**

True discipleship is marked by obedience to one’s master. *At once he called them and leaving their father they followed Him...* (Mark 1:20). The details of immediate response indicates the total obedience and level of commitment of every Christian, and whoever wishes to follow Jesus. The evangelists while telling the story, have interest in the Christian life and the seriousness of commitment for their readers. The response of the disciples in the narrative

models what the response of each Christian is to be to the Gospel. It is a costly commitment. Somewhere in the background is the story of Elisha and Elijah. Elisha cuts his family ties and security to follow Elijah and remains with him until after his ascension (1 Kings 19:19-21).

True discipleship is marked by doing what the master does. Jesus washed the feet of His disciples showing an example to us all; *You call me 'teacher' and 'master' and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet* (John 13:13-14).

Jesus' disciple is called to go to Jerusalem to share the passion, death and resurrection of his master. Everyone who responds to Jesus' call positively has to understand the deeper meaning of 'going to Jerusalem'. There is a danger of misunderstanding the true meaning of following Christ and asking to sit on His right or left hand in His glory as James and John asked (Mark 10:35-37; Matt.20:20-21). There is no glory before the cross.

Sharing the cup of passion costs a lot in life. It is very challenging to a Christian or Religious of all ages. We too, might understand partially. It is not satisfying just being a Christian without full commitment or being religious but controlled by other motives like searching for profession, promotion, power, security, favored status in the society and so on.

Jesus, after His resurrection gave instructions to His disciples and Peter that He is going before them to Galilee. There they would see Him as He told them (Mark 16:7). Here again after His resurrection, He emphasized the importance of going behind Him, to understand the meaning of going to Jerusalem and going back to Galilee behind Him. He wants us to start anew with Him in His mission. The disciple is called to the cross and to service<sup>5</sup>. This kind of response indicates a radical nature of discipleship and Christian vocation<sup>6</sup>. Every time we are called to start afresh from Christ and be witnesses to His love without going back to our past life or giving up faith because of storms of this world<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> F.J.MOLONEY.,SDB., *Disciples and prophets*, 145.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> P. JOHN PAUL II., *Apostolic Exhortation: The Consecrated Life*, no. 20.

Discipleship is based on faith in Jesus, unconditional love, self-denial, wholehearted commitment to the demands of the call, and readiness to martyrdom for the sake of Christ and the Gospel. By taking on human nature, Jesus bound the whole human race to Himself as a family through a certain supernatural solidarity and established charity as the mark of discipleship saying, *by this will all men know that you are my disciples; if you have love for one another* (John13:35). Hence, a supernatural mark of discipleship is love.

#### **1.4 Radical Following of Christ**

In the previous section I have been talking about a call to follow Christ as a redemptive gift of God to us. Recalling the situation in which the Gospel was written, we find that the Church was like in the vigil of 'Parousia' (the second coming of Christ). The atmosphere of the Christian faith was filled by their eagerness of seeing Christ coming in His glory (1 Thess 4:17). The freshness of Jesus' words and deeds, His death and resurrection and ascension were strongly echoing in their minds and hearts. Jesus was constantly before the faithful as a pattern and an ideal of their sanctity. The very definite feeling of His presence and the power of the Holy Spirit in the church were everywhere displayed<sup>8</sup>. Imagining this situation, whereby one stands at the edge of embracing Christ through persecution and martyrdom or giving up the faith, in that situation Mark probably wrote this passage of Gospel<sup>9</sup>.

He summoned the crowd with His disciples and said to them, whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever wishes to lose his life for my sake and that of the Gospel will save it. What profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? What could one give in exchange for his life? Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this faithless and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of when He comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels (Mark 8:34-38).

Jesus stands up amidst His group, the Church exclaiming His solemn words of decision-making.

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<sup>8</sup> J. AUMANN., *History of Spirituality: Development of Christian Spirituality*, 25.

<sup>9</sup> B. BUBY., SM., *Mary the Faithful Disciple*, 38-39.

He tells every baptized 'now, decide who do you want to be? This is the way of following me. In our times, persecution might include wars, famine, disasters, Christian faith opposers and so on. However, Christ is with us proclaiming his words of salvation, and one who will persevere to the end will be saved (Mark 13:13). Being strong in faith enables one to persevere in trials and in persecutions. Hence to remain strong, one has to adhere to Christ and be guided and strengthened by the Holy Spirit. We also struggle to be united with the other members of the church<sup>10</sup>.

### 1.5 Denying One Self for the Sake of Christ

*Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself...*(Mark 8:34). In the previous passage the disciples were terrified by the prediction of the passion death and resurrection of Christ. Peter wanted to prevent Jesus from accepting the will of God. In this verse Jesus is drawing the disciples closer to the reality of His life. It was a good moment to correct the wrong idea that they had about the Messiah whom they were expecting, one that would establish the earthly kingdom.

In the Gospels we find Jesus inviting a rich person to sell his properties, give the money to the poor, and follow Him. But the invitation was not accepted (Mark 10:17-30; Matt 19:16-22; Luke 18:18-30). This story shows how difficult is to deny oneself for heavenly treasure. However, many people along salvation history denied themselves to the point of giving up their lives for God. The typical example of such people are the Christians of the early church<sup>11</sup>. We too as Christians, however costly it may be, are called to take the risk as His true disciples.

Denying oneself therefore, is to accept no other security except that of God. It is an invitation to pass from egoism to transcendent self. Denying oneself means that one must abandon the final validity of all the definitions of the self, which we construct in our coping with

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<sup>10</sup> P. PAUL VI., *Encyclical letter: Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 60.1

<sup>11</sup> R. E. BROWN, S.S – C.OSIEK, R. S.C.J- P. PERKINS., *NJBC Early Church*, 1338-1353.

the world<sup>12</sup>. It is “a total attachment to the person and message of Jesus”<sup>13</sup>. It is “to say ‘No’ to oneself in order to say ‘Yes’ to God”<sup>14</sup>. A model of emptying oneself completely is Jesus Himself (Phil 2:6-8).

## 1.6 Taking Up the Cross and Following Christ

According to the Roman law, the cross was used for non-citizens and rebels. For the followers of Christ, ‘taking up one’s cross willingly’ means to accept in life the crucified Christ (1 Cor 1:23-24). It can be like Jesus’, the literary cross of martyrdom, or the non-literary cross of rejection or any kind of suffering as a result of doing the will of God.

Taking up of the cross in Mark 8:34, shows the image of suffering for whoever wishes to follow Jesus that, God will redeem them through their suffering in Christ as Jesus Himself was vindicated also<sup>15</sup>. Denying oneself for Christ and taking up the cross are the attitudes that spring from the same spirit. We Christians are invited to reject other gods in order to follow Christ faithfully. This incorporation in Jesus Christ gives us privilege to exercise His priesthood. We become united with Him and His sacrifice in the offering of ourselves and our daily activities (Rom 12:1-2). This is the responsibility of every Christian according to the life style one is living to carry up his cross with full awareness and courage up to Calvary, where from death a new life begins. One needs to be rooted in Christ and make prayer as a pillar or a way to become and remain part of Jesus’ mission. Prayer draws all people to the intimacy of God’s love. It impels a person to carry out the apostolic endeavors, daily labour and family life<sup>16</sup>. All these, become a spiritual sacrifice acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5).

In Mark 8: 35, Jesus helps His disciples to an ardent decision. He wanted them to see the treasure that is hidden in following Him and to make the best decision (Matt 6:19-20).

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<sup>12</sup> J.P. KEENAN., *The Gospel of Mark: A Mahaya na Reading*, 205.

<sup>13</sup> J.M. LOZANO., C.M.F., *Discipleship: Towards an Understanding of Religious Life*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> W.L.I.ANE., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: Gospel of Mark*, 304.

<sup>15</sup> A.Y. COLLINS., *The Beginning of the Gospel: Probing of Mark in Context*, 71.

<sup>16</sup> A. FLANNERY., *Vatican Council II: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, no. 34.

He emphasized that if one is not willing to lose life, he is not going to enjoy eternal life. But one who perseveres through persecution and death will gain eternal happiness. The follower of Christ therefore, is called to do what Jesus did. Hence, we should not separate our being and our doing. Our discipleship needs to be illuminated by Jesus' lifestyle. That is we have to be united with Christ so that whatever we do expresses who we are.

In Mark 8:36-37, it is talking about the true value of life. In following Jesus, the disciples can find their true self and nothing is more important<sup>17</sup>. Jesus shows how foolish it is to allow anything at all to prevent us from finding the best life now, and also life in the next world (Luke 12:16-20). The important thing is the giving of one's life to the point of accepting death in order to bear witness to one's faith in Jesus "whoever gives his life for Jesus Christ is par excellence the herald of the faith"<sup>18</sup>.

The life of Jesus was a life of sacrifice. He always prayed to His Father for help to continue faithfully, and He endured hardships. Having been called to discipleship we are expected to be Jesus' ambassadors by our words and deeds. Through our openness and faithfulness, salvation will find its home in people's heart. A mature disciple who embraces the life of Christ will embrace the cross and endure all sufferings.

Indeed, in dying, Christ destroyed our death and through His resurrection, He restored our life. The cross and resurrection, therefore, are the fundamental source of Christian life in the Church. In the light of the Good News, every follower of Christ needs to establish a profound relationship between suffering and joy, sacrifice and love, death and resurrection. The cross is the climax of Christ's love for human beings and all creation. It is a way for disciples to access to God the Father who is love itself (1John 4:16). Christ has risen from the dead, then, as Christians we are following the Risen Lord, with him we stand firm on His side as His disciples rooted in Him.

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<sup>17</sup> D.J. HARRINGTON, S.J., *NJBC: The Gospel According to Mark*, (41:3-4).

<sup>18</sup> A. FANNERY., *Vatican Council II: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, no.14

## 1.7 Proclamation of the Gospel Through the Power of the Holy Spirit

In my research on this topic, I was asking myself; what is the principal force of proclamation and why? What is Good News, to whom should it be proclaimed and by which means? In the end I came up with the following points. Faith enlightens us to believe the work of creation and of our salvation through which the Father is a creator, the Son is a redeemer, and the Holy Spirit is a sanctifier<sup>19</sup>. Through the full revelation in Christ, we have come to understand that Christ shines in the darkness as He Himself declares; *I am the light of the world* (John 8:12).

From this fountain of divine revelation we testify that the principle agent of salvation is the Holy Spirit. From the beginning of the New Testament, Mary conceived Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). The Spirit descends on Jesus at the moment of His baptism (Matt 3:17). Jesus was led by the Spirit to experience in the desert the temptation and the power of God before starting His mission (Matt 4:1). It is in the power of the Spirit that He returned to Galilee and began to preach (Luke 4:14). *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to glad tidings the poor ...* (Luke 4:18-21; Isa.61:1), *He breathed on them and said receive the Holy Spirit* (John 20:22).

The power of the Holy Spirit enabled the Apostles depart to all the ends of the earth in order to begin the great work of the Church's Evangelization (Acts 2:1-4). Coming down to our time the Holy Spirit empowers every believer to witness Christ and the Good News. "The Holy Spirit is the soul of the Church"<sup>20</sup>.

Proclaiming the Good News means to announce the Good News about Jesus, not other news. Jesus is the head of the proclamation; He declared, *I must preach the Good News of the kingdom of God* (Luke 4:43), *and to gather in unity the scattered children of God*

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<sup>19</sup> *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 238-260.

<sup>20</sup> P. PAUL VI., *Encyclical Letter: Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 75.2

(John 11:5). Then, He accomplished His revelation by His words and deeds, signs and miracles, death and resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit<sup>21</sup>.

The Church is born through the evangelizing activity of Jesus and the twelve, and it is the duty placed by Jesus upon the Church. The Good News is to be proclaimed to all people of all times, that they may be saved and bring back the harmony and beauty of all creation<sup>22</sup>. Christians through their participation in the prophetic mission of Christ, are given the ability to accept the Gospel in faith and to proclaim it in words and deeds. They are called to live the Gospel and evangelize it. Evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the states of humanity and to transform it from within and make it new: *Now I am making the whole of creation new* (Rev 21:5; 2Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). The authentic evangelizing zeal should spring from holiness of life, fidelity and devotion to Christ, love for God and the ones we evangelize, the living of the beatitudes and above all the profound change of heart and mind (Matt 4:7).

Proclamation should touch the hearts of people and transform them and their cultural, political, economic, and social situations. The Church stresses that salvation is liberation from every thing that oppresses the person, but above all from sins and the evil one<sup>23</sup>. The mother Church always exhorts all Christians to play their part, because they are the ones who are able to reach in all circumstances and lives of other people in society. Pope Paul VI, so eloquently said "It is becoming clearer that it is the lay person who must bring Christianity into the marketplaces; he is the Church's bridge to the modern world"<sup>24</sup>.

In Mark 8:36-37, Jesus' discourse has focused on the matter of gaining eternal life through the passion and the resurrection. In verse 38, the emphasis is on witnessing to Him and to the Gospel. Some commentaries find a distinction between Jesus and the future Son of Man. But it is doubtful that the early Christian understood such a distinction<sup>25</sup>. The shame of the

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<sup>21</sup> A. FLANNERY., *Vatican Council II: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, no. 4

<sup>22</sup> P. PAUL VI., *Encyclical Letter: Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 13.

<sup>23</sup> P.VI., *Encyclical Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 9

<sup>24</sup> H. MARTIN., *The Documents of Vatican Council II: Degree on Laity*, 486-488.

<sup>25</sup> D.J. HARRINGTON., *NJBC: The Gospel According to Mark*, (41:58-59).

disciples in Mark 8:38 is understood in the context of living in the generation, which is sinful and adulterous; it is relevant to other warnings of the prophets (Jer 3:8-9; 9:1-2; Isa.57:3; Hos 2:4-7; Ezek 16:36). For the Christians, refusing to lose one's life, to take up the cross for the sake of Jesus and His word is the same as being ashamed of Him. Also Jesus spoke of those who were ashamed of Him and His words, as belonging to this faithless and sinful generation.

Every Christian by the Sacraments of Initiation and by the gift of the Holy Spirit is called to proclaim the Gospel as an individual, with the Church and in the Church, as an active disciple, rooted in Christ and embracing his role of offering his life for Christ's sake, and for the Good News. The profession of faith indeed, imposes a way of life. Therefore, a Christian is not only a believer, but also the one who accepts the invitation to martyrdom willingly. Thus, Jesus needs free followers, those who know the danger/cost and accept it.

### **1.8 The Challenges Encountered In Discipleship**

The person of Jesus and His word, is eternal life. It invites everyone to share and take part in it. In this chapter I have been talking about the meaning of following Christ and its demands therein. It challenges us to seek the will of God behind Jesus and do it in every moment of our life. It needs the same spirit of Jesus, emptying oneself, humility and becoming obedient to death even death on a cross (Phil 2:6-8).

However, by the grace of God, in Christ, and with Christ many people accept Christ's invitation of following Him in their lives. In the first centuries for instance, martyrdom was seen as an ideal, as the more perfect way of imitating Christ. It left a deep mark on the life of the Church<sup>26</sup>. The Christians were ready to accept whatever might happen because of following Christ. And St. Paul, in his flesh, fills up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, that is proclaiming of the Gospel (Col 1:24). The Church and every Christian should fill up what is lacking in the affliction of Christ by proclaiming the Good News by all means.

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<sup>26</sup> M.FIGURA., *Martyrdom and Following of Christ in the Communal International Review*, 101.

St. Paul was really touched by suffering and this experience was the basic characteristic of his teaching, connected with the Church and the Eucharist (1Cor 10:16-17; 11:23-26). He is challenging us Christians to integrate different aspects of life in the light of faith, so that our life may become united, firm, and source of holiness in the crucified Christ, Risen Lord, in His body, the Church.

One of the questions we might ask ourselves as the Disciples of Christ is: if we are committed to live the person of Christ why is our society not more transformed? Are we not there in the offices, in the places of work, where corruption is going on, and the truth is not said? Jesus was crucified on the cross for witnessing to the truth (John 8:37). He challenges us today.

The crying voices are coming from the heart of humanity, thirsting for the word of God that saves, tenders support, love that reveals the presence of God. It is an invitation to practice our faith (James 1:14-26). The Holy Father John Paul II, challenges us that, “we cannot preach conversion unless we ourselves are converted anew every day, that every Christian needs on-going formation, together with solid, deep, and robust spirituality”<sup>27</sup>. It is a lifelong transformation in Christ, with Christ and through Christ to access to God the Father for His Glory.

## **1.9 Conclusion**

In this chapter one, we have seen Mark portraying a powerful message on discipleship, in a special way the conditions of following Christ as our text is concerned (Mark 8:34-38). In the synoptic gospels, Mark’s message on this text is clear, that the conditions for discipleship are the same for the crowds and for the twelve. Jesus invites the twelve / the leaders of the Church and the Christian to walk together.

From the Apostles the spirit of living the Gospel radically is strongly moving within the Church, establishing different charisms in order to improve the positive response to be

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<sup>27</sup>A. BELLAGAMBA., *the Mission of the Church*, 53.

Disciples of Christ. As a result, many and different religious institutions have come to embrace discipleship according to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In this way the Gospel is spread rapidly through the style of life, words, deeds, prayer, service that include: catechesis, education, medication, domestic science, different kinds of projects in order to uplift and liberate people from any kinds of oppression, that they may experience the goodness and presence of God in their live. Moreover, we have to keep the spirit of vigilance.

Through the Encyclical letter of Pope Paul VI: *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, the Mother Church too, is encouraging us to work hard, for the kingdom of God even when it is in tears that we must sow:

Let us therefore, preserve our fervour of spirit. Let us preserve the delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing, even when in it is in tears that we must sow. May it mean for us as it did for John the Baptist, for Peter and Paul, for the other apostles and for a multitudes of splendid evangelizers all through the church's history-an interior enthusiasm that nobody and nothing can quench. May it be the great joy of our consecrated lives. And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the Good News, not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient, or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the kingdom may be proclaimed and the church established in the midst of the world (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* no.80.7).

## CHAPTER II

### DISCIPLESHIP OF THE SISTERS OF CHARITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

#### 2.0 Introduction

*Now the important thing is that your ways of life should be as the Gospel of Christ requires* (Phil 1:27). These words of St. Paul's letter to the Philippians are leading us to carry on the message of the Gospel in our discipleship. As the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception, the title expresses our presence and our discipleship in the Church. We are called to live and witness to the Gospel through our words and deeds, Jesus' own method (Mark 9:31; 10:32), "to proclaim the Good News even to the places where the Gospel has not yet been proclaimed"<sup>28</sup>. Our Discipleship is modeled by the Immaculate Conception; "the first disciple of Jesus par excellence"<sup>29</sup>.

With great zeal, I am doing this research to reflect profoundly, widening, and gaining more knowledge about our discipleship in the light of Mark 8:34-38. Secondly, this study is aimed at bringing a new insight formatively and to animating more our discipleship today.

#### 2.1 Need for Re-evangelization

There is a need for re-evangelization and renewal of faith and hope. Jesus wishes us to become His disciples who are vigilant, thus He commanded us to evangelize all nations through the Good News (Matt 28:19-20). Evangelization is a command from the Lord and it "is the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her most profound identity"<sup>30</sup>. Therefore, re-evangelization is extremely necessary to make the identity of the Church shine everywhere,

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<sup>28</sup> A. FANNERY., *Vatican Council: II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, no. 11.

<sup>29</sup> G. BIGOTTO., *Mary the Mother of God*, 37.

<sup>30</sup> P. PAUL VI., *Encyclical Letter: Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 14.

every time until the end of the age when the Lord will come again in His glory to judge the living and the dead.

In all ages fallen humanity is experiencing the temptations that Jesus underwent (Matt 4:3-10). People are longing for satisfaction in earthly things, clinging to other gods, and fighting for power. There are dechristianization situations, indifference in faith, passive receiving of sacraments, atheism and so on. All these are ways of silencing the Gospel values in the hearts and in the lives of people from one generation to the next.

Jesus overcome temptations and death, so only through Him, His disciple can stand firm in faith. However, one needs to be sober and vigilant, like the five wise virgins who brought flasks of oil with their lamps to wait for the Bridegroom (Matt 25:4). Re-evangelization then, is the awakening of a person for vigilance. It establishes a thirst for God, it re-enchants the spirit of the Gospel, it brings peace, hope, justice, and love so that people may act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly (Mic 6:8), and witness to the Gospel in their lives.

Pope John Paul II, exhorts Christians to open wide the doors to Christ for He knows what is inside a person<sup>31</sup>. Re-evangelization therefore, is a radical on-going Christian formation and transformation. It is the renewal of the Holy Spirit in the lives of people. Re-evangelization is not directed only to individual persons but to all people in their variety of situations, surroundings and the changing cultures, that they may be enlightened by Jesus who is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

## **2.2 Historical Background of Our Foundress**

The Servant of God Mother Antonia Maria Verna was born on June 12, 1773, in Posquaro – Canavese, near Rivarolo, in the province of Turin, Italy. She was from a peasants family. When she was fifteen years old, she dedicated her life to the Holy Family of Jesus,

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<sup>31</sup> P. JOHN PAUL II., *Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful*, no. 14.

Mary and Joseph to keep and live purity of heart and not get married for the sake of God and His kingdom. She died at Rivarolo on December 25, 1838.

Mother Antonia was a living witness of a virtuous life, something that her teachers would always remember. She treasured the religious teachings, the sacraments and she deepened her prayer life in the light of the word of God. Thirsting for the word of God moulded her to offer herself totally to God just like a zealous apostle<sup>32</sup>.

From the 1<sup>st</sup> to the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Church history tells us about the persecutions, martyrdom and the development of Christian faith, especially during the apostolic and post-apostolic period. However, in Italy, since the 4<sup>th</sup> century, from the reign of Constantine the Emperor, Christianity became the common religion of the citizens for many centuries.

The situation at the time of Mother Antonia was affected by the French Revolution, which happened from 1793-1797. Since Northern Italy was on the boundary of France, there was a great movement of people between these two countries: sharing of ideas, copying of life styles and influence in all matters. When the French Revolution announced religious freedom in September, 1794, and other changes in society that took place, Northern Italy was also influenced. As a result many people were ignoring Christianity, giving up the faith and Christian morality. On the other hand it encouraged other people to be firm in their Christian faith<sup>33</sup>.

Mother Antonia proclaimed the gospel with her life in that situation. The Holy Spirit prompted Mother Antonia to revive the faith in people, thus, re-evangelization took place. She was a committed person, active, consistent and who knew no compromise. She was simple and gave without seeking. She did not give away things, but she gave herself. She knew that all came to her from above and in humility she made herself a servant of God following the example of Mary Immaculate. Mother Antonia was a person of prayer, devoted to the Blessed Eucharist, the Cross and Mary Immaculate. Her special virtues were Charity, Humility and Simplicity. She

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<sup>32</sup> ANONYMOUS., *In the Footprints of the Divine Master*, 30.

<sup>33</sup> M.J. SYDENHAM., *The French Revolution*, 229-238.

was radically rooted in Christ. Several young women were inspired to join Mother Antonia and dedicated themselves to God and worked together with her. These were the first companions in her apostolic work.

Mother Antonia's life was not easy, she knew uncertainty but she never doubted God. There was a fire burning within her to do the will of God, and with courage, little by little she founded a new religious family by the name of *Suore di Carità dell'Immacolata Concezione* (Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception). Diocesan approval was granted on November 27, 1835, by His Excellency Luigi P.M. Pochettin, Bishop of Ivrea. After wards, Papal approval was granted on May 21, 1904, by Pope Pius X.

### 2.3 The Name of Our Congregation

*L'ispirazione originaria della fondatrice e il nome che ci ha dato definiscono la nostra missione nella Chiesa: piena disponibilità all'opera della salvezza a immagine di Maria Immacolata* (Rdv. 1). "The original inspiration of the foundress and the name given "The Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception" defines our mission in the Church; full of disponibility in the work of salvation, in the image of Mary Immaculate" (Rdv. 1).

The great mystery of the Immaculate Conception of Mary is the central focus of our foundress. Mother Antonia was enlightened to draw her inspiration from this mystery. And for this reason she called the congregation "The Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception" which means to commit one's own life to and with Christ, freely and gratuitously for the salvation of others. *Nell'Immacolata Concezione di Maria, noi vediamo il mistero Dell'assoluta gratuità di Dio che ama e che salva, e della totale dedizione della creatura che si offre senza riserve...* (Rdv.2). "In the Immaculate Conception of Mary we see the mystery of the absolute gratuity of God who loves and saves and the total dedication of a creature who offers herself without reservation" (Rdv.2). "...Come Maria e in Maria, facciamo nostra la carità salvatrice di Cristo in una disposizione di apertura verso le necessità dei fratelli"(Rdv.3). "...like Mary and in Mary

we make our own the saving charity of Christ in an attitude of openness towards the necessities of brothers” (Rdv.3).

## 2.4 Our Charism

Charism is the gift of the Holy Spirit given for the salvation work of mankind according to the needs of time and place. Our charism is charity ( Rdv.1-4). *Con questo spirito assumiamo, nella loro attualità, le forme di apostolato indicate nelle prime regole della Fondatrice. Il programma tracciato da quelle regole include alcuni richiami evangelici, che sono ancora oggi criteri preferenziali delle nostre scelte apostolite: la Preoccupazione di catechizzare, l'attenzione massime ai poveri e ai bisognosi,..*(Rdv.4). “With this spirit we assume in their actuality the apostolic forms of the apostolate indicated in the first rules of our foundress. The program explained in those rules includes some evangelical references, which are still even today the preferential criteria of our apostolic choices: the preoccupation of catechesing, maximum attention to the poor and the needy,..”(Rdv.4). Hence, our Charism has different aspects but, the heart of each one is charity. Our charism therefore, is charity; love gratuitously in the inspiration of the Immaculate Conception, as a community with the spirit of charity, simplicity, and humility for the need of Catechesis, maximum attention to the poor and the needy. Thus, Christ is for us the Lord of Charity.

The charism expresses the motto and the fundamental motives of our foundress' call to be an apostle in her time. By catechizing, she was proclaiming the Good News, teaching and encouraging people to know deeply who Jesus is, since there was a confusion of faith due to the French revolution. She was mostly teaching the young people and the children, helping them to grow in Christian faith.

The biblical meaning of the poor, mostly in the light of the New Testament, enlightened Mother Antonia. In the Old Testament the poor person was the sinner and rich person was blessed by God (Job). However as the Old Testament develops, the prophets, and the post-exilic writers see that the increase of wealth and spread of poverty as indicating a

hardening of hearts (Amos 2:6ff). And Isaiah proclaims that it will be the task of the Messiah to defend the poor (Isa 11:4; 61).

In the New Testament the fundamental understanding of the poor is from the life of Jesus Himself (Phil 2:6-7). The beatitudes show the poor as the heirs of the kingdom of God (Matt 5:3; Luke 6:20). The magnificat of Mary declares that “the hungry will be filled and the rich sent away empty” (Luke 1:52).

St. Vincent de Paul had the unique approach to the poor as members of Jesus and this vision prompts great attention and charity in the service of the poor. This spirit of St. Vincent towards the poor too, enriched Mother Antonia. The spirit of poverty and charity moreover are the glory and witness of the Church of Christ<sup>34</sup>. And the Church recognizes in the poor and the suffering the likeness of her poor and suffering founder<sup>35</sup>.

We live in a wounded cultural system and the mentality of people who seem to be blind towards the values of the Gospel lived by the poor, suffering people, women and children. Their dignity is not acknowledged. But Jesus’ tendency towards them is quite different: He redeems them and confirms their dignity.

Mother Antonia played the same role of defending the poor. She was combating the discrimination against and ignorance of women by educating them to discover, appreciate their dignity and live it. As the first President of Tanzania, late Mwl. Julius Kambarage Nyerere, in his lifetime used to say “to educate woman is to educate the society”. Because the woman is the keeper and the giver of life, she is the first educator of the child, she can bring charity, joy, harmony, hope and also belief in the family and in the society.

Another aspect that Mother Antonia was seriously dealing with was the rights of the children, whom Jesus was using as an example of simplicity and innocence for entering the

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<sup>34</sup> A.FIANNERY., *Vatican Council II: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, no.88.

<sup>35</sup> A. FIANNERY., *Vatican Council II: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.*, no. 8.

kingdom of God (Matt.19:13-15). She catechized and educated the youth, because she knew that they are the hope of the Church and the nation.

With great tenderness she sought to uplift the afflicted, the discouraged and the oppressed. She cared for the sick who were suffering from all kinds of illness. In them she sees the suffering Christ who needs to be nursed, comforted, and loved. She helps them to experience the love of Christ who loves them, consoles them, heals them, and redeems them<sup>36</sup>. All that the foundress was emphasizing through her teachings and deeds are the fundamental services that her Sisters are carrying on today, according to the needs of time and place without changing the charism.

## **2.5 Mary Immaculate As the Model of Our Discipleship**

I wish to begin my reflection on our discipleship focusing on Mary Immaculate as our model. Indeed, the whole of her life is filled by the divine plan of redeeming a fallen humanity. It teaches us the profound wonders and deeds of God to us. It is like a school where every believer learns how to follow Jesus Christ so as to be immersed in the love of the Trinitarian God. Moreover, I am urged to highlight briefly some aspects of her life as follows: who is Mary, what is the role of Mary and Mary Immaculate as our model of discipleship.

### **2.5.i Who is Mary**

Mary is a woman chosen by God for His special purpose. In the Old Testament we find a woman mentioned through whom the savior would redeem the world. She is a virgin who shall conceive and bear a Son, whose name shall be called Emmanuel (Isa 7:14; Mic 5:2-3).

In the New Testament Mary is that woman who is presented in the salvific event, which marks the fullness of time (Gal 4:4; Eph 1:9). This event is realized and completed in and through her. Mary is the witness to the new creation (2Cor 5:17).

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<sup>36</sup>ANONYMOUS., *In the FootPrints of the Divine Master*, 44-49.

The Marcan image of Mary is definite, precise and explicit as mother of Jesus who does the will of God (Mark 3:31-35; 6:1-6a). Mark tells his community to listen to Jesus' word and accomplish the will of God. She is the image of the eschatological family.

Matthew's image of Mary is that of mother of the Messiah who is also a virgin (Isa 7:14), and daughter of Abraham her ancestor in faith (Matt 1-2).

In Luke-Acts Mary is with Jesus from conception (Luke 1:32-38). Mary is the first missionary of the Good News to Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-45). She is the one to present the prayer of Israel the 'Magnificat' (Luke 1:46-56). She is the one who gave birth to Jesus (Luke 2:1-7). She was present as the mother of Jesus when the angels and shepherds witnessed to the birth of Jesus and glorified God (Luke 2:8-20). Mary is the one who fulfilled what had to be done to Jesus as the first born according to the law of Moses (Luke 2:21-40). She was a committed mother in taking care of Jesus (Luke 2:41-52). Luke also presents the mother and true relatives of Jesus (Luke 8:19-21). He portrays Mary as "the blessed one" (Luke 11:27-28). A Lucan summary and his last mention of Mary is her presence in the midst of the believers, the Church (Acts 1:12-14).

John's image of Mary is that: she is the center of the community, she is symbolizing Israel and she is the catalyst of the faith of the disciples (John 2:1-11). John presents Mary at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus at Cana as a pillar of faith to the disciples, He presents Mary under the cross with the beloved disciple as the mother of the Church and of every believer (John 19:25ff). Mary stands as the clear symbol of the Church.

Mary in the book of Revelation is portrayed as a woman clothed with the sun (Rev 11:15). St. John calls a woman, the name that appeared from the beginning of the creation story (Gen 2:23). It can be interpreted as: The woman is Israel, the nation from whom the Messiah comes. The woman is the Church or the New Israel who like the original Israel is mother of those faithful to God.

Mary is the disciple of Jesus. She is the first to believe in God perfectly, she conceived Jesus; first through her act of faith and obedience and then in her womb. Thus, she became the first disciple among the believers, a disciple of Jesus par excellence. Fr. Patric J. Bearsly says: "Mary as a perfect disciple of Jesus offers to us a paradigm for our own discipleship"<sup>37</sup>. Mary is a perfect disciple of Jesus who does the will of God in the whole of her life as her Son who always does the will of God (Heb 10:5-7). The Scriptures present Mary as a model of discipleship and faith. Mary reveals her great concern to the believers and under the cross she becomes the mother of the disciples par excellence, and so becomes herself a model of belief and discipleship<sup>38</sup>. The Church dogmas also confirm; who Mary is, what is her role, and it looks at her as a model of discipleship par excellence when it confesses: (a) Mary's divine motherhood, (b) Mary's perpetual Virginity, (c) Mary's holiness: the Immaculate Conception and (d) the Assumption of Mary. Here I would like to highlight the dogma of the Immaculate Conception with regard to our presence in the Church as the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception.

Through the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus* of 8<sup>th</sup> December 1854, Pius IX defined the Immaculate Conception as a dogma of faith: "The most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of the omnipotent God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved from all stains of original sin, is revealed by God, and therefore to be firmly and resolutely believed by all the faithful"<sup>39</sup>.

According to the New Testament economy, grace is the gift of God, the giving of His Son (Rom 8:32), which contains all the other gifts. In the light of the Holy Spirit, the Church reflects on Mary who is *full of grace* (Luke 1:28), *Blessed are you among women* (Luke 1:28). These realities are seen to refer to Mary's holiness and freedom from sin. The way the angel addressed Mary *Hail full of Grace...you have found grace with God* (Luke 1:28-30),

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<sup>37</sup> B.BUBY.,S.M., *Mary the Faithful Disciple*, 13.

<sup>38</sup> R.F.BROWN-K.P.DONFRIEND-J.A.FITZMYER-J.REUMANN., (eds.), *Mary in the New Testament*, 289.

<sup>39</sup> P. PIUS XII., *Encyclical Letter; Fulgens Corona; On Marian yr. And Dogma of Im.Con.* no.1.

provides the church a key to understand her Immaculate figure. Thus Mary is understood as a woman in whom God is present in a very privileged way and that she has been affected radically by the presence of God. This makes her free from sin and full of virtues and splendour. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception is the climax of the doctrine on Mary's sinlessness and holiness. In that she is the eschatological icon of holiness of the Church and of the final face of every Christian. She is the spotless mirror of God's glory, she provides the Church with a most faithful image of the "perfect disciple" the pure Virgin, the faithful bride, the loving mother, the queen crowned with glory<sup>40</sup>.

### **2.5.ii The Role of Mary in the Work of Salvation**

Mary as the mother of God and the Church, is always interceding for the Church, which is on pilgrimage here on earth<sup>41</sup>. She is the model and interceder for every believer. She is the model of every virtue and model of worship<sup>42</sup>. She is the model of our discipleship, she continues telling every believer *Do whatever He tells you* (John 2:5b). Mary is the model of sublime love and hope. She is the model of humility, and she represents the *anawim* who belong to the kingdom of God. She is the model of persevering prayer in singleness of mind and heart (Acts 1:12-14)

### **2.5.iii Our Discipleship in the Image of Mary Immaculate**

In carrying on with our charism we learn from and are strengthened by the holiness of Mary who offered herself totally to God and to the salvation work as a perfect gift. We dedicate ourselves to say 'Yes' in her 'Yes' to God's invitations in the work salvation as she said *Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word* (Luke 1:38).

Reflecting back to our foundress, we find that she was inspired and enlightened in a special way to believe in the Immaculate Conception some years back before the mother Church

<sup>40</sup> Fr.G KOCHOLICKAL.,SDB., *Doctrine Foundation of Christian Spirituality, Class Notes.*

<sup>41</sup> A. FLÁNNERY., *Vatican II: Dogmatic Constitution On the Church*, no. 68-69.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, no. 65.

declared it as a dogma of our faith. This profound link between Mary Immaculate and our presence in the Church as the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception inspires us to offer ourselves and our charity together with the mystery of the Immaculate; concretizing it with the indication of our religious profession on December 8<sup>th</sup>.

Mary's song of praise and gratitude, and service to Elizabeth is in fact an external expression of the internal reality. This reality urged our foundress to respond generously to Jesus' invitation to participate in the work of salvation. Our foundress had the same reflection and understanding of the Magnificat as Giovanni Bigott who says: "the Magnificat describes justice, mercy, liberation for all the oppressed, the greatness of the poor; it gives the complete meaning of Christ"<sup>43</sup>. Magnificat and Mary's service are the model in our discipleship, and parallel to our charism.

## **2.6 Discipleship In the Consecrated Life of the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception**

"The consecrated life is at very heart of the Church as a decisive element for her mission, since it manifests the inner nature of the Christian call. And it is an intimate part of her life and holiness"<sup>44</sup>. According to the meaning of the consecrated life in the Church, we as the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception, are consecrated to God and His kingdom as close disciples of Jesus Christ through the evangelical counsels inspired by the mystery of holiness of Mary. We live a celibate life by dedicating ourselves to God with an undivided heart and living an infinite love of the Trinitarian God (1 Cor 7:32). Through the vow of poverty, we depend on God's providence following the example of Christ, *Though He was rich.. became poor* (2 Cor 8:9). By the vow of obedience we imitate Christ whose "food" was to do the will of God (John 4:34).

The deepest meaning of our discipleship is expressed by its nature as Christians and

<sup>43</sup> G. BIGOTTO, *Mary the Mother of Jesus*, 113.

<sup>44</sup> P. JOHN PAUL, *Encyclical Letter: The Consecrated Life*, no. 3.

as consecrated persons, inspired by the mystery of the Immaculate to be a gift of love to God and the Gospel. Being who we are impels us to reach others and practice our discipleship among them with Charity, Humility and Simplicity.

We gain the strength of living the Consecrated life in prayer, which is an intimate relationship with God, the divine instrument of one's wholeness, unity and inner peace. It is the basis of relationships to us as well as to others. Prayer pulls us away from self-preoccupations, encourages us to leave familiar ground, and challenges us to enter into a new world. It unites us with Christ (John 15:5). And therefore, prayer becomes a state of life that is living in the continuous presence of God through the most ordinary activities of our everyday living.

*La Vergine Orante umile e fedele nella lode di Dio Altissimo, presente in orazione nella Chiesa di ogni tempo, ispira la nostra vita di preghiera (Rdv.88).* "The prayerful Virgin, humble and faithful in the praising the Highest God who is always present in the Church, inspires our life of prayer"(Rdv.88).

B. Bigotto says: "prayer is the laboratory of faith; it is a time of intimacy and thus of evangelization and revelation"<sup>45</sup>. Prayer helps faith to be light, active, challenge and it moves a person to experience love, mercy and will of God. Mary's intimacy with God in prayer and faith enabled her to become the mother of God, and to be able to integrate joys and sorrows in her life. She is a model of prayer for every Christian.

*La preghiera e la penitenza furono la prima e fondamentale risposta delle fondatrice alla chiamata del Signore, fanno perciò parte della nostra vocazione: dobbiamo coltivarne lo spirito e la pratica quotidiana. Offriamo volentieri a Dio la fatica del lavoro e le contrarietà, l'austerità della vita e le difficoltà dell'apostolato. Offerte consapevolmente, le nostre inevitabili sofferenze sono assimilate al mistero redentivo di Christo e diventano strumento di salvezza (Rdv.91).* "Prayer and penitence were the first and fundamental response of our foundress to the Lord's call, so they are part of our vocation: we have to cultivate the spirit and

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<sup>45</sup> B. BIGOTTO., *Mary the Mother of Jesus*, 110.

practice everyday. Willingly we offer to God our fatigue of labour and misfortunes, the austerity of life and difficulties of the apostolate. When offered consciously to God our inevitable sufferings are assimilated in the redemptive mystery of Christ and they become instrument of salvation” (Rdv.91).

The word of God is a fountain of our life, strength, light and guidance in journey towards holiness. The sacraments too, are the source of our strength, mostly centered in the Eucharist as our constitution emphasizes: “*Fare del Eucaristia il centro della nostra esistenza è impegno battesimale e per noi è anche impegno particolare di congregazione. Nel mistero eucaristico troviamo infatti unificati i tre recordi che le sorelle ci hanno trasmesso come ultimo messaggio della fondatrice: Crocifisso – Tabernacolo – Rosario, quasi una sintesi del suo insegnamento di vita*” (Rdv.82). “Making the Eucharist the center of our existence is a baptismal commitment and for us is also a particular commitment of the congregation. In the mystery of the Eucharist we actually find unified the three records that the sisters have passed to us as the last message of the foundress; Crucifix – Tabernacle – Rosary, almost a synthesis of her teaching of life” (Rdv.82).

*L’Eucharistia attualizza tutto il mistero di Cristo, la sua morte in croce e la sua risurrezione; e richiama il mistero di Maria, ad esso indissolubilmente congiunto nel piano salvifico del Padre*” (Rdv.83). “The Eucharist actualizes all the mystery of Christ, his death on the cross and resurrection. It also recalls the mystery of Mary as far as she is united in the plan of God’s salvation” (Rdv. 83). The community life, which is derived from the life and unity of the Holy Trinity, is part of our consecrated life. We are called by Jesus and united by the Holy Spirit in order to witness the life of love and faith as the first disciples of Christ who shared their spiritual life and possessions (Acts 2:42-47). It is along with the vows that we profess as we recite it in our formula; *...e l’impegno di vivere in comunione con le mie sorelle nel servizio di Dio e della Chiesa; “...and commitment to live together with my co-sisters in the service of God*

and the Church". By this foundation of our consecrated life we always seek to be an image of God's love and Trinitarian unity in our lives and in our discipleship.

## **2.7 Our Apostolate**

In the time of Mother Antonia, the dignity of women, children, and orphans, was neglected. Likewise today, there are some places where a woman is regarded as inferior to man, for instance, the Masai woman. One of our apostolate is run in Arusha, Tanzania among the Masai. The Sisters are humbly educating the children, the youth and the women, to appreciate their dignity and moral and Christian values. The Masai girl is helped to discover her talents and her role as a girl and mother. The goal of accompanying them is to encounter Christ, and to be filled with joy, that they may announce to themselves and to all people, the Easter joy (John 20:18).

With the same spirit and fidelity we bring Jesus to the orphans, and the victims of AIDS at Makalder – South Nyaza in Kenya. In Lebanon in Ghebaleh country, we opened school for children who were affected in the civil war, which is known as a school for the poor. In Argentina, the sisters are doing their apostolate by sharing the life of people. They visit and catechize them in their homes, and help them to cope courageously with hardships. In Italy there are big and small communities. The big communities are running schools and hospitals, while the small communities are doing the pastoral work in the parishes according to the request of the Bishop. These few examples indicate our discipleship wherever we are: Italy, Switzerland, Albania; Lebanon, Israel, U.S.A, Argentina, Turkey, Libya, Tanzania and Kenya. By following the example, of Mary Immaculate we learn to love and serve, to believe and depend on God's providence even when the situation seems hopeless.

## **2.8 The challenges In Our Discipleship Today.**

We who are devoted to the patronage of Mary by sharing her role in work of salvation, are inspired and challenged to embrace wholeheartedly her model of life. She

challenges us to grow in faith and love, to stand on the side of the poor and the voiceless. She challenges us to live the life of simplicity that leads to a charity and humble service.

A true disciple of Christ submits to God's will and brings people to Christ that they may be one flock under one shepherd (John 10:16). It is a challenge for us to bring a powerful message of the Gospel to the hearts and minds of people, to transform their beliefs and culture as we have experienced in the Maasai society and in some other places.

Our charism challenges us in its different aspects and leads us to a greater discernment. It challenges us to be more attentive, and prudent as we offer our services in this growing and changing society. Other challenges that we encounter in our discipleship are the future of youth, inculturation in mission, new aspects in mission, secularism, pluralism, globalism, lack of morality, the role mass media, the dignity and the role of woman.

Charity as our charism, and as the core aspect, together with Mary's holiness are challenging us in all aspects of our discipleship and Mary challenges us to be holy, docile to the Holy Spirit, by being rooted in Christ and remaining faithful to our vocation.

## **2.9 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have dealt with the discipleship of the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception, the need for re-evangelization in order to revive the faith in people and motivate them to be vigilant. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, and the inspiration of Mary Immaculate, our foundress responded accordingly to the needs of evangelization. She founded the Congregation through which the charism is flourishing in the Church. As she was challenged by the situation of her time, her Sisters too, are facing different challenges in their discipleship in their time.

## CHAPTER III

### How Mark 8:34-38 Illuminates the Discipleship of the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception.

#### 3.0 Introduction

*Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light of my path* (Ps 119:105). The word of God illuminates and guides a person to acknowledge his Creator, and appreciate His wonderful and harmonious plan of redeeming a human being.

Mark is portraying a powerful message of salvation to whoever wishes to follow Christ. Humbly, many people, including our foundress, responded to Jesus' call radically up to the point of losing their lives. We too, in the light of this word, find the way, the truth, and the strength to follow Jesus Christ step by step as individuals and as a Congregation. The word of Jesus strengthens, nourishes, and challenges us in our discipleship. It is the perfect model of following Jesus.

#### 3.1 Model of Radical Discipleship

Radical discipleship is based on following Jesus. Jesus warned Peter when he wanted to go ahead of Him by changing the will of God. He rebuked him and said; *"Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God"* (Mark 8:33). These words of Jesus enlighten every follower of Him to be in touch with the truths of the call, and they instruct one to remain in his/ her place as a disciple, behind. Jesus challenges us to learn from Him and do the will of God even if it costs life.

As a Congregation we are ready for pastoral service asked by the Church, but always with a humble and sincere heart, believing that it is Jesus who asks and therefore, we need to remain behind Him in our service (Rdv.5). We are challenged to live the virtue of humility and wisdom in doing the will of God.

Like the disciples of Jesus in Mark 8:34, we are learning from Jesus to deny ourselves and live faithfully our vows and the charism, to be committed fully in our apostolate that demands us to revive faith in the hard situations of our times. Jesus encourages us to witness and teach others to stand firm for their faith, hoping in God who is loving and faithful to His promises. His words lead us to carry willingly our cross as personal and as Congregational. We experience and learn to love from the cross of Jesus, which is the symbol of our redemption and of the wisdom and the power of God who loves and redeems. It gives the true meaning to carrying the cross of our life.

Our foundress Mother Antonia, a faithful disciple of Jesus, contemplated the cross of Jesus and learned from it how to carry her own cross. By the grace of God she was enabled to climb up to Calvary, a way of suffering, rejection and hardships with thanksgiving and love. As our foundress and loving mother, she left this gift of embracing the cross as her profound teaching. Like her, we accept suffering as the most precious gift of uniting with the crucified Jesus. We would now be able to regard the cross of Jesus as the most meaningful instrument through which the redemption of souls is made possible<sup>46</sup>. And hence, we are strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner self (Eph 3:16). This Spirit urge us to proclaim the Good News (1Cor 9:16). The cross then, becomes for us the source of joy, and hope of new life and transformation<sup>47</sup>.

This Spirit leads us to bring hope and new life to the poor, the needy, the hungry, the sick, with love and humility through a word of consolation, or a gentle touch, listening, praying or any other way by which a person is experiencing God's love.

Our Religious Life and our Apostolate need uprighteness of heart and mind and the power of God that strengthens us to face difficulties. It is from Jesus that we learn to do the will of God in different situations, and to face what is awaiting for us. Jesus teaches by His life as

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<sup>46</sup> ANONYMOUS., *In the FootPrint of the Divine Master*, 61.

<sup>47</sup> A.F LANNERY., *Vatican Council II: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, no. 7.

Mark says; *And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; and they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid...*(Mark 10:32).

Jesus was going to Jerusalem ahead of them. We find a similar statement in Luke 9:51, where Jesus sets His face to go to Jerusalem despite His awareness of what is awaiting Him there. The passage indicates conscious acceptance of His destiny and obedience to fulfil God's will despite all opposition. As the high Priest and Good Shepherd goes ahead of us giving an example of being Christians.

Mother Antonia, learned from her master to be firm and confident. We find her for example, being tested greatly in her faith, perseverance and in her charity when the procedure for obtaining the approval for her Congregation was delayed (from 1806-1835)<sup>48</sup>. From her we also learn to be firm and persevere in difficulties.

Jesus' call seeks a generous heart, loving and free. It demands a profound detachment from material things and being commissioned to proclaim the Good News. Jesus as He was sending His disciples for the mission instructed them to take nothing for the journey but a walking stick (Mark 6:8-9). He teaches us to be detached from material things and become rich in spiritual things such as faith in God, dependence on His providence, faith sharing with others and a simple life style that expresses poverty for the kingdom of God. It is a call to live a spiritual poverty (Matt 5:3). Radical following of Christ involves openness of heart to other's needs as He told a rich person. *You are lacking one thing. Go sell what you have and give to the poor, then you will have treasure in heaven; then, come, follow me* (Mark 10:21). It is an invitation that leads us to experience God as our father who embraces all humanity through and in Christ.

Practicing this passage of the Gospel, Mother Antonia wants her sisters to be free from any attachment as it is written in the constitution: *...L'assoluto distanco e disinteresse da ogni altra cosa che non sia il regno di Dio* (Rdv.4). "...absolute detachment to all that is not

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<sup>48</sup> ANONYMOUS., *In the Footprint of the Master*, 32.

the reign of God” (Rdv.4). And therefore, in our discipleship we seek to develop always this spirit of detachment for God and for supporting the poor, our brothers and sisters in Christ. It is in this spirit that as a Congregation we love the poor as our Constitution says: *Amiamo i poveri con lo stesso amore di Cristo. Sensibili alle loro sofferenze e alle loro attese, e ci sentiamo impegnate a contribuire anche i frutti del nostro lavoro alla loro promozione integrale, e ci adoperiamo per una società più giusta nello spirito del Vangelo* (Rdv.43). “We love the poor with Christ’s Love. Sensitive to their sufferings and their expectations, we feel involved to contribute with the fruits of our work in their integral promotion and we work for a more just society in the Gospel’s spirit”(Rdv.44).

The paschal mystery is the climax of our redemption. Jesus completes the Old Covenant of God with His people and constituted the New Covenant with His blood. He prepared with His disciples before giving Himself as a lamb of God for the new Covenant. He instructed His disciples to find the place for this anticipation saying; *Go into the city and a man will meet you, carrying a jar of water. Follow him. Whenever he enters, say to the householder, ‘The teacher’ says, where is my guest room, where I may eat the passover with my disciples?’* (Mark 14:14). This preparation for Passover brings about the intense moment of our redemption. The meal He was having is an anticipation of the eternal banquet in the kingdom of God, the community of life between God and His people. Then, Jesus instituted the Eucharist, the thanksgiving (1Cor 11:23-26). Here Jesus is speaking about His blood that seals the *new covenant* and *new relationship* between God and His people through Him in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is instructing us to prepare ourselves to share His passion and death so that we may share His glory. He is always going ahead of us as He did after His resurrection that His disciples would meet Him (Mark 16:7). Jesus is teaching all Christians to be in a place as His disciples. In celebrating the Passover, we are united with the risen Lord in the Eucharist, who redeems, strengthens, and increases our faith, hope and charity in our discipleship.

This was the profound experience of our foundress and ours too, for she left to us an example and a gift: the Tabernacle (Rdv.82), in which we are rooted in Christ. At the Tabernacle, the sisters find a mother who prayed and loved in humility, silence, and great faith. She knew that Jesus was there, always ready to receive His adopted children of God for as long as they want to talk to Him or for silent worship: always open to any heart that sought out His help. Mother Antonia had really understood Jesus' commandment of love, which comes from the Eucharist, to be a source of charity and unity. Her sisters can trace her footprints at the Tabernacle<sup>49</sup>.

In the above texts the highlighting point is Jesus' call and the profound link between Jesus and His disciples: *...and follow me* (Mark 8:34), *...follow me and* (Mark 1:17), *...Disciples followed Him* (Mark 1:18; 6:1), *...and followed Him* (Mark 1:20). *But turning and seeing His disciples* (Mark 8:33), *...and His disciples* ((Mark 8:34), *...teaching His disciples* (Mark 9:31), *...with my disciples?* (Mark 14:14), *...tell His disciples* (Mark 16:7). This indicates that Jesus wants to involve people in His salvific work. He calls to Himself those whom He wants so that they may experience Him, that He may instruct them, and send them for mission. A profound relationship between Jesus and a disciple must be built and developed in every moment that he/she may be transformed and be sent. Hence, Mark is strongly portraying to us a radical discipleship which should center on the person of Christ, with a deepening of following Him, and an ever growing relationship with Him, the crucified and risen Lord.

### **3.2 Source of Strength**

The source of strength in our discipleship is the gift of the Holy Spirit given to us who is affirming and teaching us what to say in difficulties and trials. Jesus encourages us to be open because the Holy Spirit is within us saying: *when they bring you to the trial and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say; but say what ever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit* (Mark 13:11).

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<sup>49</sup> ANONYMOUS., *In the Footprints of the Master*, 61-62.

The Holy Spirit is working in us and in the Church. On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit was sent in order that He may continually sanctify the Church and the believers, reminding them all that Jesus taught, so that those who believe might have access through Christ in one Spirit to the Father (Eph 2:18). He is the Spirit of life (John 4:47, 38-39). The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful as in a temple (1Cor 3:16; 6:19). In the believers the Holy Spirit prays and bears witness to their adopted status (Gal 4:6, Rom 8:15-16,26). The Spirit guides the Church and every believer in the way of all truth (John 16:13), and gives His fruits (Eph 4:11-12; 1Cor 12:4; Gal 5:22). Indeed, the source of strength is the gift of the Holy Spirit to us.

The Spirit strengthens with power in the inner self. Therefore, the Holy Spirit is the source of strength and piety, and sanctifies and bears His fruits within a person. He is the source of life. He enlightens, guides, protects and instructs what to say in time of trial. But one needs a special inner silence, attentive disposition, openness, recollection of heart and mind, docility to Him, and constant practice of His virtues and His gifts. Jesus instructs us to see and live beyond cultural and blood relationships. He encourages and confirms us the meaning of eschatological family we are longing for. He explained the profound eschatological relationship as He replied; *Who are my mother and my brothers? And looking around at those who seated in the circle He said, here are my mother and my brothers!* (Mark 3:33-34). Jesus recognizes His new family as those who are listening to Him. His new family is not established by blood relationship but by one's surrender to God's will revealed in Jesus. It is faith not the flesh that gives entry to the kingdom. And this new family makes one a brother, a sister and a mother to Jesus. It relates to those believing disciples who truly form the kingdom of God as the true family of Jesus. However, the passage in itself does not exclude the physical family members from eventual participation in the eschatological family, but only if they do the will of God<sup>50</sup>. Thus, listening to the word of Jesus and doing the will of God is the source of strength and true

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<sup>50</sup> R.E. BROWN - K.P.DONFRIED - J.A.FITZMYER - J.REUMANN., (eds.) *Mary in the New Testament* 51.

discipleship. Mary as a model becomes the center of this eschatological family, for she heard the word of God, responded to it and pondered it over in her heart (Luke 2:19,51). Mark also presents Mary being outside with the crowds, she represents our own struggle in following Jesus, struggling with our doubts, we come to a deeper faith and an ardent commitment to Jesus<sup>51</sup>. Mary struggles with whoever seeks her help in following Christ, and her holiness challenges many people to respond to the call to holiness.

As a Congregation which is under her patronage, as the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception, we find the mother both loving and affectionate, a model of holiness, purity and charity. Mother Maria Antonia, often prayed and obtained help from the Blessed Mother through the Rosary. We continue praying and contemplating on the mystery of our redemption through the Rosary and that strengthens us in our discipleship<sup>52</sup>.

### 3.3 General Conclusion

In our discipleship we are illuminated and guide by the word of God step by step. *Indeed, the word of God is living and affective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart* (Heb 4:12). Mark in his Gospel developed this theme of discipleship. Moreover Jesus continues teaching through His word, He purifies a person and leads to a deeper self denial, asceticism, mortification even to death, for His sake and the Good News, for sharing a new and everlasting life in Him.

By the model of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we learn how to follow Jesus and become His true disciples. Mother Antonia responded generously to this call, with charity, humility, and simplicity and in the inspiration of Mary Immaculate she founded the Congregation through which her Sisters are carrying on the charism in their discipleship.

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<sup>51</sup> B. BUBY., *Mary the faithful Disciple*, 48.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

The Holy Spirit strengthens, encourages and enlightens a disciple to embrace the Paschal mystery and become a member of the eschatological family. However, one has to share the same life of his/her master as Vatican II emphasizes;

Martyrdom makes the disciple like His master, who willingly accepts death for the salvation of the world, and through it He is conformed to Him by the shedding of blood. Therefore the Church considers it the highest gift and supreme test of love. And while it is given to a few, all however must be prepared to confess Christ before men and to follow Him along the way of the cross amidst the persecution which the Church never lacks. (*Lumen Gentium* no.42).

## **Biblical Abbreviations**

### **Old Testament**

Gen	Genesis
Exod	Exodus
1Kgs	1Kings
Ps(s)	Psalms(s)
Job	Job
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Ezek	Ezekiel
Dan	Daniel
Hos	Hosea
Amos	Amos
Mic	Micah
Zech	Zechariah

### **New Testament**

Matt	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts (or Acts of the Apostles)
Rom	Romans
1Cor	1Corinthians
2Cor	2Corinthians

Gal	Galatians
Eph	Ephesians
Phil	Philippians
Col	Colossians
1Thess	1Thessalonians
Heb	Hebrew
Jas	James
1Pet	1Peter
2Pet	2Peter
1John	1John
Rev	Revelation

#### Other Abbreviations

AD	Anno Domini
Ed(s)	Editor(s)
Fr	Father
Sr.	Sister
S.C.I.C	Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception
Ibid	Ibidem
St.	Saint
Rdv.	Regola di Vita (Constitution)

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#### ABBREVIATIONS

- ABD* FREEDMAN, N. D., ed., *Anchor Biblical Dictionary*, II, New York 1992.
- CPDBT* STUHLMUELLER, C., ed., *The Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Collegeville 1996.
- DBT(NRE)* BROWN, C., ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Theology (New Revised Edition)*, I-III, Michigan 1967 - 1980<sup>5</sup>.
- DBT (NRE)* LÉON-DUFOUR, X., *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, (New Revision Edition), New York, 1967.
- GED* *The Readers Digest Association.*, *Great Encyclopedia Dictionary*, New York 1966.
- IBC* FARMER, W. R., ed., *The International Bible Commentary*, Collegeville - Minnesota 1991, 1998.
- NDCS* DOWNY, M., *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, Bangalore 1995.

*NJBC* RAYMOND, E.- BROWN, S.S.- JOSEPH, A.- FITZMYER, S.J.- ROLAND, E.MURPHY,  
C.O., (eds)., *The New Jerome Biblical Commenantary*, New – Jersey  
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*PCB* WILSON, McL. R., *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, London 1962 – 1997<sup>17</sup>.

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