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Original Article

Serving Beyond Borders: The Missionary Witness of Sr. Conchita Cruz, SSps and its Impact on the Church in Flores, Indonesia

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Abstract

This paper explores the missionary life and enduring impact of Sr. Conchita Cruz, SSps, whose forty-six years of service in Flores, Indonesia, exemplify a profound commitment to mission “beyond borders.” Using a qualitative, historical-narrative methodology, the study examines her life within the wider socio-cultural, historical, and religious landscape of Flores, a region shaped by deep Catholic roots, indigenous traditions, and increasing socio-economic transformation. The paper situates her ministry within the missiological framework of the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit (SSps), highlighting her vocational journey from the Philippines to Indonesia, her professional contribution as a medical doctor, and her significant act of adopting Indonesian citizenship. Drawing on contemporary mission theology—particularly the attitudes of spirituality of presence, kenotic spirituality, reconciliation, and holistic spirituality—the study analyzes how Sr. Conchita embodied a cross-cultural and transformative missionary identity. Her witness reveals a mission rooted in friendship, humility, mutual learning, and intercultural solidarity. The findings show that her service transcended geographical, cultural, linguistic, and religious boundaries, demonstrating an incarnational and relational approach to mission that enriched both herself and the communities she served.

Keywords: Church; Flores; Missionary witness; Serving beyond borders; Sr. Conchita Cruz

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Introduction

Pope Francis opens his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) with the affirmation that “the joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus” (1). This foundational statement frames Christian mission not merely as an obligation, but as a natural outpouring of a transformative relationship with Christ. The encounter with Jesus, understood as a profound experience of God’s unconditional love becomes the wellspring of authentic missionary discipleship.

When missionaries internalize this divine love, their ministry is no longer driven primarily by duty or institutional expectations, but by an inner joy that seeks expression in service. Such joy fosters resilience, compassion, and a deep sense of purpose, enabling them to witness the Gospel in diverse cultural and social contexts. Thus, the missionary vocation according to *Ad Gentes* emerges as both a personal response to God’s initiative and a communal act of sharing the Good News, rooted in a heart that has been fundamentally transformed by the love it has received (2; *Deus Caritas Est*, 1).¹

The missionary vocation within the Mission Congregation of the Servants of the Holy Spirit (*Servarum Spiritus Sancti*, SSpS) entails a conscious and radical commitment to participate in the Church’s universal mission. As articulated in the SSpS Constitution (Art. 103), the missionary is called to relinquish familial, cultural, and linguistic attachments in order to be available for service wherever her presence as a woman is most needed. This form of discipleship requires not only geographical relocation but also profound intercultural engagement, demanding adaptability, spiritual maturity, and a willingness to inhabit unfamiliar socio-religious contexts for the sake of the Gospel (Bevans, 2002).

Within this framework, the missionary life of Sr. Conchita Cruz, SSpS, emerges as a paradigmatic example of cross-cultural religious commitment. A medical doctor trained at the University of Santo Tomas in Manila, she discerned a vocation that combined professional expertise and missionary service. Motivated by deep faith and guided by her biblical motto “I Love You with Eternal Love. Therefore I Continue My Loyal Love to You” (Jer 31:3), she accepted her assignment to Flores, Indonesia, arriving in 1972 with little prior knowledge of its people, culture, or language. Her subsequent forty-six years of uninterrupted service until her death in 2018 demonstrate a remarkable degree of self-giving, cultural integration, and fidelity to mission.

Flores provided a complex pastoral context shaped by a long history of Portuguese Catholic mission, indigenous animistic traditions, and linguistic diversity. The island’s socio-religious environment required missionaries to engage in sustained language acquisition, anthropological sensitivity, and dialogical interaction with local customs. Sr. Conchita’s ability to navigate these dynamics is evidenced not only by her enduring service in key medical institutions but also by her eventual decision to obtain Indonesian citizenship in 1996. This act signified a profound identification with the nation and community she served, demonstrating a missionary identity that transcends national and cultural boundaries.

¹ The Council affirms that the Church’s missionary mandate flows from God’s initiative and the transformative grace that draws believers into communion and sends them forth as witnesses. See also Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est* on Christian Love, 1. Benedict XVI teaches that Christian identity and mission originate in the encounter with God’s love, which transforms the believer and becomes the impetus for sharing that love with others.

Her missionary trajectory thus constitutes more than a personal narrative; it provides a lens through which to examine broader questions concerning cross-cultural mission, inculturation, and the embodiment of Christian witness in pluralistic contexts. The present paper situates her life within the historical and cultural landscape of Flores, analyzes her ministry through contemporary missiological frameworks, and reflects on how her lived experience exemplifies mission “beyond borders” geographical, cultural, linguistic, and ecclesial.

This paper attempts to answer to several questions. What is the situation in Flores, when she arrived and until her death? Who is Conchita and why she decided to hold an Indonesian citizenship? What is the meaning of mission beyond borders drawing from her missionary experiences?

By examining the life and work of Sr. Conchita Cruz, this study contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations on the nature of missionary identity, intercultural competence, and the transformative possibilities of religious presence in diverse settings. It also highlights the enduring significance of women religious missionaries in shaping local ecclesial communities and fostering cross-cultural solidarity.

This paper is organized into five main parts. The Introduction outlines the meaning of missionary life within the SSpS Congregation and presents the context of Sr. Conchita’s call. The second part describes Flores’ historical and religious background. The third part highlights the formation, service, and personal qualities of Sr. Conchita. The fourth part analyzes her missionary attitudes using theological and missiological frameworks. Finally, the Conclusion synthesizes the findings and reflects on her enduring legacy among the people of Flores.

Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative, historical-narrative methodology to explore the missionary life and impact of Sr. Conchita Cruz, SSpS, in Flores, Indonesia. Data for the study were gathered from documentary sources such as SSpS congregational archives, mission records, biographical accounts, historical descriptions of Flores, and legal texts on Indonesian citizenship. These sources were examined through historical and narrative analysis to reconstruct her life story, mission assignments, and her integration into the local community.

Findings and Discussion

Flores: Historical, Cultural, and Religious Context

The word Flores comes from Portuguese which means “flower” reflects the early European encounter with the island and its natural beauty. Located in the province of East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, Flores encompasses approximately 14,300 km² and forms part of the Lesser Sunda Islands, together with Bali and West Nusa Tenggara (Toda, 1999). Geographically, the island is characterized by a rugged topography of mountains and hills shaped by volcanic activity. Historically, its rough seas and remote terrain rendered access difficult for outsiders, contributing to the island’s relative isolation prior to modern transportation. Today, however, Flores has become both a culturally vibrant region and a prominent tourist destination. Most notably, it is recognized as one of the major predominantly Catholic regions in Indonesia (Wydiawati, 2018).

Before the arrival of Christianity, the indigenous religions of Flores were rooted in animistic worldviews. Natural elements such as forests, large stones, and ancient trees were believed to be inhabited by spiritual forces. Ancestor veneration

formed a central component of local cosmology, wherein ancestors were regarded as powerful intermediaries capable of bestowing prosperity, fertility, and protection, yet also capable of inflicting misfortune, illness, and natural disasters (Widyawati, 2018).

While contemporary Florenese communities now include adherents of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism (Kong Hu Chu), elements of ancestral reverence persist. Evidence of this continuity can be seen in the megalithic traditions that remain active in several sub-ethnic groups. These traditions, dating back approximately 2,500 to 3,000 years—include the construction and preservation of ritual structures dedicated to ancestral spirits, underscoring the enduring influence of indigenous belief systems.

The introduction of Catholicism to Flores dates to the mid-16th century. In 1561, the Bishop of Malacca dispatched four Dominican missionaries, marking the beginning of sustained Catholic evangelization on the island. Their efforts laid the foundation for more than three centuries of Dominican missionary activity across the region. The establishment of a fort in Solor and a seminary in Larantuka by Father Antonio da Cruz in 1566 further consolidated the missionary presence (Steenbrink, 1993).

By the 19th century, the mission was continued by the Jesuits and subsequently by Dutch diocesan priests, leading to the widespread expansion of Catholic influence throughout mainland Flores and neighboring islands such as Adonara and Timor. Over time, Catholicism became deeply woven into the socio-cultural fabric of Flores, shaping its religious identity and communal life.

In the contemporary era, Flores stands at the intersection of cultural preservation and rapid socio-economic development. The island has gained international prominence as home to Komodo National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and a growing number of ecotourism destinations such as Kelimutu National Park, traditional villages (e.g., Wae Rebo, Bena), and numerous marine conservation areas. Improved transportation networks, expanding educational institutions, and increasing economic opportunities have contributed to significant social transformation.

Despite these developments, Flores retains a strong communal identity rooted in Catholic faith, indigenous cultural values, and traditional kinship systems. The coexistence of modernity and tradition—evident in the continued practice of ancestral rituals alongside active parish life—illustrates the island's dynamic and evolving character. This present reality provides crucial context for understanding missionary engagement on the island, including the work of individuals such as Sr. Conchita, whose ministry unfolded within this complex tapestry of cultural continuity and socio-religious change.

The Life and Formation of Sr. Conchita Cruz,SSpS

Pope Francis on his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* remarked “The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms” (3). Sr. Conchita came to Flores - Indonesia with a love she has for God and with her total trust that God is waiting for her in Flores. She risked herself to be His missionary to the people of Flores. She did not know how or what is Floresnese look like. What she has was a spirit of a young missionary to be a healer for all.

She was born on December 29, 1936 to a devoted Catholic Family of Fidel N. Cruz and Belen Topacio. She was baptized as Amicia Conchita Cruz. At home she is usually called by the sweet name Amicia, which means friend and Cruz means Cross, now we address her by the name Sr. Conchita Cruz , SSpS.[6] She lived out her name

in a wonderful way; becoming a friend for all and serving them beyond her own self. She decided to enter the convent of Missionary Sisters Servant of the Holy Spirit or known as SSps Sisters or Blue Sisters or Holy Spirit Sisters, on June 5, 1962 and went through the initial formation period in Manila - Philippines. On May 8, 1965 she made her first vows. After completing his formation periods she decided to answer her total 'YES' to God's call forever through professing her final vows on May 8, 1971, and received a new mission from the General Leadership Team in Rome. Sr. Conchita is to be sent to Flores – Indonesia.

She arrived in Jakarta and then Flores on 12 February 1972. At this time, Flores was predominantly Catholic, with farming as its major economic resources (Steenbrink, 81). Upon her arrival in Flores, she started learning Indonesian. In September 1972 - October 1972, she was sent to St. Elisabeth Hospital-Lela, Maumere, then to St. Raphael Hospital-Cancar, Manggarai, West Flores in November 1972 – November 1973. In December 1973 – September 2006, she served as medical doctor, teacher and leader of St. Elisabeth Hospital-Lela. She had devoted almost her entire life and mission to this institution.

Her motto –“I Love You with Eternal Love. Therefore I Continue My Loyal Love to You” which taken from the Prophet Jeremiah 31:3 beautifully capture her missionary spirit. Jeremiah in this particular chapter (31) spells out “the certainty and character of Israel’s future hope, which firmly grounded in the message of salvation” (Clements, 1973, 184). This specific verse 3 speaks “God’s freshly offered love issues in faithfulness, which gives impetus for rehabilitation of Israel,” (Brueggemann, 1998, 283) a divine love that does not remain abstract but expresses itself in faithfulness, initiating Israel’s restoration and healing.

This same dynamic of love—one that reaches, restores, and renews—echoes profoundly in her call to serve beyond borders. Just as God’s faithful love in Jeremiah extends to Israel even in exile, moving past boundaries of failure, separation, and distance, her missionary life reflects a willingness to cross physical, cultural, and emotional borders in order to embody that same restorative love. The verse becomes not only a source of personal inspiration but also a theological foundation for mission: love that goes beyond self becomes service that goes beyond borders.

Through this lens, her ministry is not simply an act of duty but a continuation of God’s own outreach—a commitment to meet others where they are, to accompany them in their struggles, and to help rebuild hope. Jeremiah’s message of divine fidelity becomes the heartbeat of her vocation, empowering her to serve with courage, tenderness, and perseverance wherever love is needed.

Became An Indonesian; Close to The People

The issue of Indonesian Citizenship is regulated in Law No. 12 of 2006 and Government Regulation (PP) No. 2 of 2007 (Indonesian Immigration Office website). There are eight requirements for a non-Indonesian to gain an Indonesian citizenship.

1. 18 (eighteen) years of age or already married;
2. At the time of filing the application, she/he has resided in the territory of the Republic of Indonesia for at least 5 (five) consecutive years or at least 10 (ten) consecutive years;
3. Physically and mentally healthy;
4. She/he can speak Indonesian and recognize the Indonesian philosophy: Pancasila and the Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia year 1945;
5. She/he has never been sentenced for committing a crime by imprisonment of 1 (one) year or more;

6. If by obtaining Citizenship of the Republic of Indonesia, do not become dual citizenship;
7. She/ he has a job and / or has a regular income; and
8. She/he pays citizenship payment to the Indonesian government

After many years of dedicated service among the people of Flores, Sr. Conchita Cruz, SSpS, completed the formal process of naturalization and was granted Indonesian citizenship. Having fulfilled all legal and civic requirements, she received full recognition as an Indonesian citizen. On 10 September 1996, motivated by her profound love for the mission in Flores, she made the deliberate and sacrificial decision to leave behind her Filipino citizenship and fully embrace a new national identity. From that moment onward, she identified herself entirely as Indonesian—not merely in official status but also in personal and missionary commitment.

Wholeheartedly she promised in front of Indonesia government and people “I relinquish entirely all allegiance to any foreign power, and I accept and acknowledge the supreme authority of the Republic of Indonesia and will remain faithful to it. I undertake this obligation wholeheartedly and will not diminish it in any way” (Flores East Secretariat E-File).

Her decision entailed relinquishing the rights, privileges, and social advantages associated with being a Filipina, including the comfort of cultural familiarity, economic benefits, and the security of her homeland. Such a choice, however, was not an act of loss but a theological and missiological testimony. By freely surrendering what many would consider indispensable markers of identity, she embodied a fundamental principle of missionary life: that authentic service often requires crossing boundaries—geographical, cultural, and existential.

In this context, her naturalization becomes a concrete expression of the theme “serve beyond borders.” It demonstrates that missionary commitment is not confined to temporary presence or emotional affection for a people, but may call for a radical reconfiguration of one’s own identity for the sake of deeper solidarity. Her life illustrates that serving beyond borders does not diminish the self; rather, it expands one’s horizons, enriches personal and spiritual growth, and strengthens one’s capacity to participate fully in the life of the community being served. In choosing to become Indonesian, Sr. Conchita witnessed to a mission that transcends territorial definitions and national allegiances, revealing a form of discipleship grounded in universal love, intercultural openness, and unwavering dedication to the people entrusted to her care.

Serving Beyond Borders

The spirit of being a religious missionary had brought her service beyond borders. She went beyond the border of cultural background, border of language, border of race, border of faith, border of geographical, and in short, border of differences in so many aspects of life. She came to a situation where Flores at that time, as stated by John Paul II, in his Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (RM), was considered as “lack Christian communities sufficiently mature to be able to incarnate the faith in their own environment and proclaim it to other groups” (33). Into this situation, he continues, the missionary activities should tackle on “pastoral care” (33). The presence of Sr. Conchita, SSpS in the land of Flores has brought many people to experience God’s love as a source of life. She has cared for them and cured them from their illnesses.

The transformative impact of her missionary presence in Flores becomes even more evident when viewed through the wider theological and missiological discourse

on what it means to cross borders for the sake of the Gospel. Her life and ministry not only responded to the concrete pastoral needs identified in the region but also exemplified the deeper spiritual dispositions required of missionaries in contemporary contexts. In this sense, Sr. Conchita's service was not merely a response to external circumstances; it was an embodiment of an interior spirituality that enabled her to engage people across lines of culture, language, and social experience. It is within this framework that the insights of contemporary missiologists become particularly relevant, offering conceptual lenses through which her lived witness can be interpreted and appreciated.

Peter C. Phan mentioned four attitudes and practices that appear most appropriate missionaries in crossing borders in today's world, as he quoted from Robert Schreiter; "spirituality of presence, kenotic spirituality, reconciliation, and holistic spirituality" (Phan, 2003, 137). Sr. Conchita, SSpS has lived out all these four attitudes as a missionary serve beyond borders.

1. *Spirituality of Presence*

Flores politically, is an island with nine regencies. It has 28 languages used across the island, with richness of cultural values and rituals (Fernandez, 2007). There are six religions practiced in this island, with Catholic as its majority. Into these realities, Sr. Conchita was sent and witnessed to God's love, "the presence goes beyond accessibility," (Phan, 2003, 138). It demands not only presence physically but it should go beyond it. It is an acceptance to a reality of pluralism.

Spirituality of presence "includes genuine friendship with those living on the other side of the border and a dialogue of life with them" (Phan, 2003, 138). It indicates sometimes "silent witness of life rooted in the experienced of God" (Phan, 2003, 138). John Paul II, in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* notes that the spirituality of presence in mission is expressed as "contemplative action and active contemplation" (23). The spirituality of presence as described here emphasizes a mode of missionary engagement grounded not primarily in verbal proclamation but in relational depth and existential authenticity.

The first element, "genuine friendship with those living on the other side of the border," highlights the interpersonal dimension of mission, suggesting that authentic evangelization arises from reciprocal relationships rather than hierarchical or directive encounters. This friendship presupposes openness, vulnerability, and the capacity to enter another's cultural, social, and personal world with respect and humility (Bevans and Schroeder, 2004). In this sense, as describes in the document *Dialogue and Mission*, presence becomes a form of dialogical encounter, often referred to as a "dialogue of life" (42), in which shared experiences, daily interactions, and mutual concern become vehicles for communicating God's love.

The second aspect, "silent witness of life rooted in the experience of God" underscores the contemplative foundation of missionary presence. Silence here is not passivity or withdrawal but a witness arising from interiority, where the missionary's actions, attitudes, and manner of being reflect a life shaped by ongoing communion with God (Nouwen, 1981 and Merton, 1971). Such silent witness is particularly effective in contexts where direct proclamation may be inappropriate or where trust must first be established. Pope Paul VI in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* states that "modern people listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers" (21). It is a spirituality that relies on integrity of life as a form of testimony.

Together, these elements form what has been described as mission understood as "contemplative action and active contemplation." This formulation expresses a dynamic integration of doing and being, where action flows from

contemplative grounding, and contemplation is continually enriched by active engagement with others.

Mission, therefore, is not a task added onto spiritual life but a natural extension of it—a way of being present in the world that reveals God’s love through attentiveness, compassion, and relational fidelity. As *Redemptorist Missio* put it beautifully that “The witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission: Christ, whose mission we continue, is the “witness” *par excellence* (Rv 1:5; 3:14) and the model of all Christian witness” (42). The spirituality of presence thus offers a model of missionary practice that transcends mere functional service and embodies a holistic, incarnational approach to serving across borders.

Sr. Conchita embodied this spirituality with remarkable consistency throughout her decades in Flores. Her presence among the people was characterized by genuine friendship rather than clerical distance. She learned local languages, participated in community rituals, and entered homes not as an outsider but as a trusted companion. Her attentiveness to the sick, whom she cared for with tenderness and skill made her a visible sign of God’s healing love. In many instances, the trust she gained came not from words but from the silent witness of her daily actions: walking long distances to visit the ill, sitting quietly with families in their grief, and offering her time without complaint.

Her life exemplified “contemplative action,” for her service was sustained by deep prayer and an unmistakable joy rooted in her relationship with God. At the same time, her “active contemplation” was evident in the way she discovered God in the people she served—their resilience, their stories, their cultural richness. She did not impose faith; she shared life. Through her steady presence, she became a bridge across differences of language, culture, and religion, revealing that the heart of mission is not movement but being with.

In this way, Sr. Conchita’s witness in Flores stands as a living expression of the spirituality of presence: a mission that crosses borders through friendship, humility, and contemplative love.

2. Kenotic Spirituality

The concept of kenotic spirituality emerges from the theological notion of kenosis, derived from Philippians 2:6–7, where Christ “emptied himself” in order to assume the condition of a servant. In missionary theology, this kenotic dimension translates into an attitude grounded in humility, self-emptying, and receptivity. The kenotic spirituality refers to an attitude of a missionary as a “receiver not a giver” (Phan, 2003, 139). They have to put themselves “as a stranger and as a guest” (Phan, 2003, 139). They need to let the host teach them about everything. Above all they are to live a life filled with gratitude.

The description of the missionary as “a receiver not a giver” reframes traditional understandings of mission by challenging the presumption that missionaries arrive primarily to impart knowledge, faith, or resources. Instead, kenotic spirituality insists that authentic mission begins with the recognition of one’s own incompleteness and with an openness to learn from the host community (Bosch, 1991).

To “put themselves as a stranger and as a guest” underscores this disposition. A stranger acknowledges that they do not fully understand the cultural, linguistic, and social dynamics of the community they enter. A guest recognizes dependence on the hospitality, guidance, and generosity of others. These dual postures according to *Ad Gentes*, dismantle asymmetries of power and privilege, allowing the missionary to enter into relationships marked by mutuality rather than dominance (11).

By allowing the host community to “teach them about everything,” missionaries affirm the inherent dignity, cultural wisdom, and theological insight embedded within local contexts. This approach aligns with contemporary missiological perspectives that emphasize inculturation, intercultural dialogue, and the recognition of God’s presence already operative within every culture (Bosch, 1991; Bevans & Schroeder, 2004; Dupuis, 2002).

Central to kenotic spirituality is also the cultivation of a life of gratitude. Gratitude, in this framework, is not merely an emotional response but a spiritual orientation that acknowledges the gifts received from God and from the host community (Amaladoss, 1990). It shapes the missionary’s worldview, fostering humility, respect, and reverence for the people among whom they minister. Gratitude prevents the missionary from viewing themselves as benefactors and instead situates them as participants in a reciprocal exchange of grace (Nouwen, 1981; Merton, 1971).

In sum, kenotic spirituality challenges conventional notions of missionary authority by replacing them with vulnerability and relational reciprocity. It positions mission not as an act of one-sided giving but as a transformative encounter in which the missionary is continually formed, enriched, and humbled by those they serve. This spirituality forms an essential foundation for a mission that genuinely crosses borders, not through power, but through self-emptying and openness to the other (RM, 55).

The dynamics of kenotic spirituality are clearly reflected in the life and missionary witness of Sr. Conchita. Upon her arrival in Flores, she did not assume the role of an expert or benefactor, despite her professional competence and religious training. Instead, she entered the local context as a learner, recognizing herself, in Phan’s terms, as a “receiver rather than a giver.” She allowed the people of Flores to teach her their languages, customs, healing practices, and ways of relating. By positioning herself as a “stranger and a guest,” she relinquished any claim to cultural superiority and embraced the vulnerability required for genuine intercultural encounter.

Her willingness to depend on the hospitality of local families, especially in her early years, demonstrated a profound openness to being formed by the community she came to serve. She listened attentively to the stories of mothers, elders, and village leaders; she sought guidance from them in navigating cultural rituals and local norms; and she allowed their wisdom to shape her ministry. In doing so, she lived the foundational principle of kenotic mission: that the people evangelize the missionary even as the missionary seeks to evangelize the people.

Moreover, her daily life was marked by a deep spirit of gratitude. She frequently expressed appreciation for the trust extended to her, for the opportunity to accompany the sick and the poor, and for the cultural richness she encountered. This grateful disposition not only sustained her spiritually but also strengthened her relationships with the community, who saw in her not a foreign authority but a humble presence who honored their identity. It was precisely this gratitude that empowered her to surrender her Filipino citizenship and embrace Indonesian identity fully, an act that further manifested her self-emptying love for the people of Flores.

Thus, Sr. Conchita’s life stands as a compelling embodiment of kenotic spirituality. Through humility, receptivity, and gratitude, she crossed borders not by imposing herself but by allowing herself to be transformed. Her mission was shaped not by dominance but by mutuality, not by unilateral giving but by the reciprocal exchange of grace. In her, the kenotic way of Christ took a concrete, human form, revealing a missionary presence capable of healing, uniting, and enriching both the giver and the receiver.

3. Reconciliation

The spirituality of reconciliation has vertical and horizontal dimensions. Vertical dimension refers to “God’s reconciling humanity to God’s own self,” (Romans 5:1-11), where reconciliation is portrayed as a divine act made possible through Christ’s self-giving love. In this perspective, reconciliation is not merely the restoration of moral balance but the reestablishment of a covenantal relationship in which humanity is invited into communion with God (Schreiter and Jorgensen, 2013, 13; RM, 55). This vertical grounding serves as the theological foundation for any missionary practice, reminding the missionary that reconciliation is first received as gift before it is extended as task (Bosch, 1991; Bevans & Schroeder, 2004).

While horizontal reconciliation is between humans and with cosmos. It encompasses interpersonal relationships, community dynamics, and broader societal structures marked by division, injustice, or historical wounds (Schreiter, 1992; Amaladoss, 1990). This spirituality of reconciliation becomes especially significant when viewed against the backdrop of colonial and postcolonial histories, which have deeply shaped the contexts in which missionaries often work. Colonialism introduced hierarchical relations between colonizer and colonized, frequently justified under the guise of “civilizing missions.” Such histories have left lingering wounds, including mistrust toward foreign presence, cultural dislocation, and the erosion of indigenous authority structures (Schreiter, 1992; Bosch, 1991).

Within this context, the spirituality of reconciliation calls missionaries to reject any remnants of colonial attitudes, whether explicit or subtle and adopt a posture that actively dismantles unequal power dynamics. For missionaries to achieve this, they need to cultivate attitude of “listening and waiting, attention and compassion and post-exilic existence” (Phan, 2003, 143).

The emphasis on listening counters the colonial impulse to speak first or define reality for others. The call to attention and compassion resists the objectification of local communities and restores their dignity as agents of their own history. The notion of post-exilic existence invites missionaries to recognize and accompany communities still grappling with collective trauma, displacement, or the legacy of cultural suppression (Schreiter & Jorgensen, 2013).

In this way, reconciliation becomes not only interpersonal but profoundly anti-colonial, fostering relationships built on mutuality rather than domination, partnership rather than paternalism, and solidarity rather than superiority. Mission according to Pope Francis in his Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* is thus reframed as a collaborative process in which healing is pursued through shared vulnerability, truthful memory, and the restoration of just and respectful relationships (215).

Within the Flores context, where colonial histories had left both visible and invisible marks on society, Sr. Conchita embodied this spirituality of reconciliation. Her ministry was characterized by a posture of deep listening—whether to local leaders, families, or patients—allowing their narratives to shape her understanding of the community’s needs and aspirations. She approached the people not as subjects to be instructed but as partners whose wisdom, culture, and spiritual heritage deserved reverence.

Her compassionate presence among the sick and marginalized functioned as a form of horizontal reconciliation, healing not only physical ailments but also the relational fractures caused by poverty, marginalization, or historical wounds. By integrating herself fully into Indonesian life, even to the point of embracing Indonesian citizenship, she rejected colonial patterns of foreign superiority and instead chose a posture of solidarity and shared identity.

In living this way, Sr. Conchita became a reconciling presence—embodying a mission that is not coercive but liberative, not colonial but communally participatory, and not hierarchical but mutually transformative. Through her witness, the spirituality of reconciliation takes on concrete form as a pathway toward healing, justice, and unity in a postcolonial world.

4. Holistic Spirituality

Another essential attitude for missionaries entering a new cultural or religious context is the capacity to integrate into and remain open to the religious lives of others. This openness requires a deep respect for the beliefs, practices, and spiritual experiences of the communities they serve, acknowledging that the divine can be encountered in multiple ways beyond one's own tradition. Phan identifies four interrelated dimensions that a missionary must embrace to cultivate this integrative openness: "the self, fellow human beings, the cosmos, and God" (Phan, 2003, 145).

The first dimension, the self, calls missionaries to cultivate self-awareness and humility. They must recognize their own cultural, religious, and personal assumptions while remaining open to growth and transformation through interaction with others (Rahner, 1978; Nouwen, 1981). This self-reflective posture prevents the imposition of one's own worldview and allows for genuine encounter.

The second dimension, fellow human beings, emphasizes relational engagement and mutual respect. Missionaries are invited to recognize the dignity, wisdom, and spiritual insights of others, entering into dialogue rather than unidirectional teaching (Smith, 1979; Sanneh, 1989). In this way, human relationships become spaces for reciprocal learning and authentic witness.

The third dimension, the cosmos, expands the missionary's horizon to include the interconnectedness of creation. Respecting the natural and cultural environment in which communities live is a recognition that religious life is often inseparable from ecological and social contexts (*Laudato Si*, 66-69). Engagement with the cosmos encourages missionaries to appreciate the sacred embedded in local landscapes, rituals, and communal ways of life.

Finally, the fourth dimension, God, situates the missionary's openness within the broader theological framework of divine transcendence and immanence. By seeing God's presence at work in multiple contexts, missionaries develop a spirituality that affirms rather than diminishes the religious experiences of others (EA 31-32). This dimension encourages a contemplative stance, allowing the missionary to discern divine action within the lives and cultures of the people they serve.

Taken together, these four dimensions foster a holistic missionary attitude: one that is integrative, respectful, and dialogical. Such openness enables missionaries to engage meaningfully with diverse communities, witnessing to their own faith while honoring the sacred realities already present in others' lives. This approach transforms mission from a one-sided transmission of beliefs into a mutual encounter that enriches both the missionary and the community (Schreier, 1992).

Sr. Conchita exemplified this integrative and open attitude throughout her decades of missionary service in Flores. In terms of the self, she approached the community with humility, acknowledging her own cultural and religious background as a foreigner from the Philippines while remaining willing to be transformed by the local context. She continuously adapted her ministry to the lived realities of the people, demonstrating a reflective awareness that her presence was not to impose but to accompany.

Regarding fellow human beings, Sr. Conchita fostered deep, reciprocal relationships across social, cultural, and religious divides. She listened attentively to

the elders, families, and local leaders, learning from their wisdom and respecting their spiritual practices. Her engagement was relational rather than transactional; she entered into the lives of others not as an authority but as a companion, creating spaces of trust where dialogue and mutual learning could flourish.

Her respect for the cosmos was evident in how she immersed herself in local cultural rituals and appreciated the spiritual significance of the natural environment. She recognized that people's religious expressions were often inseparable from their agricultural cycles, sacred sites, and community traditions. By honoring these dimensions of life, she demonstrated that mission is not limited to doctrinal teaching but includes attentiveness to the holistic experience of human life and creation.

Finally, in relation to God, as religious missionary Sr. Conchita maintained a spirituality that discerned the presence of the divine in all aspects of the communities she served. She witnessed God's work not only in explicitly Christian expressions but also in the moral, cultural, and spiritual richness of the people she encountered. This recognition allowed her to celebrate the gifts already present in the lives of others while sharing her own faith with integrity and humility.

Through these four dimensions, Sr. Conchita lived an integrative missionary presence, bridging cultural, religious, and social divides. Her openness and receptivity illustrate that mission is not solely about conversion or instruction; it is about accompanying people in their spiritual journeys, honoring their worldview, and participating in a mutual exchange of life, faith, and love. In doing so, she embodied a form of service that transcends borders not only geographical but also cultural, religious, and relational.

Her presence does not break down the boundaries of differences, but makes those differences enrich each other. She became a person whom Anthony Bellagamba described as the "person of the present," a person living in the present, who is in contact with today's reality, and a "person of the beyond" (Bellagamba, 1992), someone which goes beyond its own culture, history, values, mother tongue, living symbols and even empties herself in order to adapt and accept the culture of the people of Flores.

Conclusion

Pope John Paul II expressed his gratitude to all missionaries in his Encyclical Letter, *Redemptorist Missio* when he says "I express gratitude to the missionaries who, by their loving presence and humble service to people, are working for the integral development of individuals and of society through schools, health-care centers, leprosaria, homes for the handicapped and the elderly, projects for the promotion of women and other similar apostolates" (60).

Being a missionary is a way of going beyond oneself for the Kingdom Of God. Sr. Conchita Cruz, SSpS, exemplifies a missionary life that truly serves beyond borders not only crossing geographical boundaries but also cultural, religious, and relational divides. Through her spirituality of presence, she revealed God's love in attentive companionship and silent witness; through kenotic humility, she embraced vulnerability, gratitude, and learning from the communities she served; through the spirituality of reconciliation, she fostered healing, justice, and solidarity while rejecting hierarchical and colonial attitudes; and through openness to the religious lives of others, she engaged in mutual dialogue, honoring the self, fellow human beings, the cosmos, and God.

Her life demonstrates that authentic mission is relational, incarnational, and transformative, enriching both the missionary and the communities they accompany.

Sr. Conchita's witness offers a paradigm for contemporary mission, a mission grounded in love, humility, and mutual respect that transcends borders in every sense of the term.

Sr. Conchita has left her land and her beloved family for the sake of the Kingdom of God. She is a religious missionary who serves beyond borders of land, language, culture and background. She might have left this world, but her legacy lives forever in the heart of the people of Flores, Indonesia.

Declaration on the Use of AI

The authors declare the use of AI tools (ChatGPT and Grammarly) to enhance the readability and presentation of the study. These tools did not influence the original content, analysis, and/or conclusions. The authors affirm that all analyses and interpretations were conducted

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