

# The Reality of Mission and “Missionariness” in the SVD Parishes in Agusan del Sur, Philippines

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## Abstract

This research study explores the question of becoming a missionary parish in the context of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) parishes in Agusan del Sur. Specifically, the research deals with the reality of a missionary parish. The “reality” presents the SVD parishes in Agusan del Sur (ADS), Philippines as the locus of mission. It first describes the people of Agusan province along with their culture, religious beliefs, practices, and history. Then it provides a profile of the six parishes and one quasi-parish. This reality is evaluated by exploring the “missionariness” or missionary character of the SVD parishes in Agusan del Sur. This is done in the light of the notion of a missionary parish and in the context of their growth and development.

**Keywords:** *Missionary Parish, SVD Parishes, Agusan del Sur, Missionariness.*

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## Abstrak

Studi penelitian ini mengeksplorasi pertanyaan menjadi paroki misioner dalam konteks paroki yang dilayani oleh Serikat Sabda Ilahi (SVD) di Agusan del Sur. Secara khusus, penelitian ini berkaitan dengan realitas paroki misioner. “Realitas” menghadirkan paroki-paroki SVD di Agusan del Sur (ADS), Filipina sebagai lokus misi. Ini pertama kali menggambarkan orang-orang di provinsi Agusan bersama dengan budaya, kepercayaan agama, praktik, dan sejarah mereka. Kemudian memberikan profil enam paroki dan satu quasi-paroki. Realitas ini ditelaah dengan menelusuri karakter “misioner” atau misioner paroki, misioner SVD di Agusan del Sur. Hal ini dilakukan mengingat pengertian paroki misioner dan dalam konteks pertumbuhan dan perkembangannya.

**Kata-kata kunci:** Paroki Misioner, Paroki-Paroki Yang Dilayani SVD, Agusan del Sur, Kemisioneran

## 1. Introduction

Vatican II’s Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes*, declares: “The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature. For it is from

the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she takes her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father” (*Ad Gentes*, no. 2) In this regard, James Kroeger states, “Christians believe in a Trinitarian God, who is not just the founder of a missionary community, the Church, but a God who is inherently missionary. The *Missio Dei* was already operative before the Church came into existence” (Kroeger, 2014: 8). Indeed, the Decree “*Ad Gentes* begins with a trinitarian locus for the origin of mission. Mission is part of the very nature of what it means to be a Christian and to be Church” (Javier, 2019: 43). The mission begins in the very heart of God. The Church is modeled on *Missio Dei*.

This missionary identity of the Church is stressed today. Indeed, Pope Francis emphasizes the identity of the Church as a missionary Church. This is seen in his Apostolic Exhortation on “The Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World,” *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG). Pope Francis says:

I dream of a ‘missionary option’, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language, and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation (EG, no. 27).

Antonio Pernia comments, “And so, he dreams of an outward-looking, rather than an inward-looking, Church; a Church more concerned about affairs ‘ad-extra’ than about issues ‘ad-intra’” (Pernia, 2021: 2). This entails a Church whose identity and mission are defined not in reference to itself but to the world.

The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) spoke of the local Church as the focus of the mission in Asia. As the Asian bishops put it, “The primary focus of our task of evangelization then, at this time in our history, is the building up of a truly local Church” (FABC, no. 9). In this perspective, one of the biggest challenges for the Church and for truly missionary is parish ministry of the local Church. This is because the local Church happens in the parish. According to Robert Rivers, “The parish was a wonderful setting to carry out the evangelization work of the church. Could we create missionary parishes instead of maintenance-oriented communities to carry out that work?” (Rivers, 2005: xi). In fact, many parishes are not missionary parishes because they just serve the people by celebrating the sacraments, and over-emphasis on devotions rather than welcoming, engaging, and reaching out to people as Pope Francis encourages in *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG, no. 17).

The Society of the Divine Word (Latin: *Societas Verbi Divini*) (SVD) has been involved in parish ministry and has been trying to use the paradigm of Pope Francis to promote missionary parishes. SVD missionaries working in

parishes are challenged to give more attention to a new way of doing parish work. In this perspective, six SVD parishes and one quasi-parish in Agusan del Sur, in Mindanao, in the Philippines, have been trying to become missionary parishes with some, but not complete, success. The SVD has been present in Agusan del Sur for 50 years now. SVD presence in Agusan del Sur started in 1972. This jubilee of the SVD presence in Agusan del Sur is a unique opportunity to evaluate the “missionariness” of the parishes under its care.

Thus, this study discusses the reality of mission in the context of the SVD parishes in Agusan del Sur (ADS). It is divided into three parts: First, Agusan del Sur and its people. Second, mission in the SVD parishes in ADS and profile of the SVD parishes. Third, the “missionariness” of the SVD parishes in ADS.

As a case study, this research employs an interview of the parish priests and the people of the SVD parishes in Agusan del Sur in the past and in the present. The interview was conducted face-to-face in some cases and through email in other cases.

## **2. Agusan del Sur (ADS) and Its People**

### **2.1 Overview**

Geographically, Agusan del Sur is one of the provinces in Mindanao, Philippines. It is located in the Caraga Region.<sup>1</sup> Agusan del Sur (ADS) occupies a portion of Northern Mindanao, bounded in the north by Agusan del Norte, on the east by Surigao del Sur, on the south by Davao del Norte, and on the west by Misamis Oriental and Bukidnon (Aquino Administration, n.d: 1).

ADS has a land area of 9,989.52 square kilometers or 3,856.98 square miles. In 2020, ADS had a total population of around 718,425.<sup>2</sup> Rivers criss-cross the province. The Agusan river is the largest among them, which cuts the province into two along a north-south direction (Aquino Administration, n.d: 2). This great river has a significance for evangelization. Regarding the significance of this river, Delia Solivio and Erlinda Ortega note, “The success of the Spanish evangelization of the natives in Agusan can be partly credited to this

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1 Caraga Region is known as Region XIII. This Region is composed of five (5) provinces, namely, Agusan del Norte, Agusan del Sur, Surigao del Norte, Surigao del Sur, and Dinagat Island.

2 <https://cmci.dti.gov.ph/prov-profile.php?prov=Agusan%20Del%20Sur&year=2020> (accessed on September 28, 2022).

great river, for it made transportation possible, especially in those times when it was easier and safer to travel along the river than through the forest” (Solivio and Ortega, n.d: 34).

ADS has thirteen municipalities, namely, Sibagat, Prosperidad, San Francisco, Rosario, Bunawan, Trento, St. Josepha, Veruela, Loreto, La Paz, Talacogon, San Luis, Esperanza, and one city, Bayugan. The municipalities along the river are called the river towns, while those along the highway are called the highway towns (Solivio and Orgega, n.d: 34).

In terms of language, Visayan is the most widely used language among the Agusan people, particularly by Cebuano, Boholano and Ilonggo. In ADS, there are also some popular languages, namely, Higayanon, Butuanon, Surigaonon, Manobos and many others. However, most of the people can understand and communicate using the Pilipino or Tagalog language (Solivio and Orgega, n.d: 3).

ADS is predominantly an agricultural province. Farming is the principal means of livelihood for its population. Rice and corn are the province’s primary products. Other products available are bananas, coffee, cacao, vegetables, soybeans, root crops, fruit crops, coconut, rubber, abaca, falcata, melon, and other crops. Among the mineral deposits available, gold is the most sought-after mineral (Solivio and Ortega, n.d: 6). Because of these realities, ADS is attractive to enterprising migrants and can accommodate more people coming from other cities and provinces.

The predominant religion in ADS is Catholicism, followed by around 70% of the population. Other religious groups are Iglesia Filipina Independiente, Seventh-Adventist Church, Iglesia ni Christo, United Pentecostal Church, Born Again, United Church of Christ in the Philippines, and Islam. It is interesting to note that in ADS, Muslims are few.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.2 *The Culture of Agusan del Sur (ADS)*

Ethnographically, the original inhabitants of ADS were the Negritos and

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3 This is because, in the 18th century, the Muslim tribes in Davao invaded the Manobos in Agusan del Sur. However, the Manobos fought back against the Muslims. In this regard, Eladio Manguyod, the robust and influential *Datu* (the title for chiefs and sovereign princes of numerous indigenous people) of the Manobos tribe, led his people to victories after fighting hard and drove the Muslims out of Agusan. It was during those times that the Manobos tribe was converted to Christianity. (This information is taken from the history of Agusan in the Veruela parish office).

the Mamanwas. In the early years, they were driven into the interior by migrating tribes from nearby Borneo, Celebes, and Malaysia and by the Manobos and the Bagobos in the neighboring Davao Region. The Mamanwas descendant still inhabit the innermost recesses of ADS’ forested areas and comprise the great bulk of the cultural communities in the province. The Manobos are found in the highway towns of Bunawan and Trento, and in the river towns of San Luis, Veruela, Talacogon, La Paz, and Loreto towards the boundary of Agusan del Sur and Davao del Norte (Loque, 2008: 97-98).

Augustinian missionaries in the 17<sup>th</sup> century considered the people of the Agusan valleys and mountains as Manobo (Provincial Tourism, n.d: 7). By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, loggers and gold prospectors started pouring into the lowlands and interiors of Agusan pushing the Manobos further into the forest. Consequently, the upper parts of the river, together with the mountainous region beyond the headwaters of the river, and the towns of Talacogon, Bunawan, Veruela, and Prosperidad, were almost emptied of the Manobos. Instead, they hosted a community of Christians from the Visayas, constituting the majority among various people in the said towns (Provincial Tourism, n.d: 7).

Today, the province of ADS is populated by 900.000 people of multi-ethnic origin (Provincial Tourims, n.d: 7). This is because many immigrants come from other places in the Philippines. More precisely, inspired by the mining companies and agricultural products, the migrants from Luzon and Visayas decided to become permanent settlers. This resulted in intermarriages with the natives (Solivio and Ortega, n.d: 17).

The people in ADS are known as peace-loving and gentle people. The favorable climate makes them non-temperamental. They have the humor of the Visayan, the frugality of the Ilocano, and the ingenuity of the natives. All these are legacies from forebears who ventured into these parts of the archipelago (Solivio and Ortega, n.d: 18).

Some significant cultural values of the people in ADS can be seen in their way of life. For instance, one of the values is the so-called “*Inato lang*.” According to Tomas Andres, “*Inato lang* is a Visayan term meaning our own small or little way of doing things. This is a value wherein simplicity in doing something, such as making modest preparation for a party, inviting only close relatives and friends to an occasion” (Andres, 2007: 16). In addition to this, there are also other values that can be identified in Agusan, namely, *pagtagad* (respect), *magtinabangay* (helping each other), *utang sa kabubut-on* (debt of gratitude), *bahala na* (fatalism), hospitality and *bayanihan* (a reciprocal exchange of labor) (Andres, 2007: 19-20).

### 2.3 *Religious Beliefs and Practices*

For a long time, the people in ADS believed in the supreme *Magbabaya* (the good supreme deity and planner). They also believed that the sun or the moon was the abode of the Supreme Being. Hence, they have their Full-Moon prayer or *pagdiwatahan*, a form of community prayer done through a medium, e.g., a medicine man or *Tambayon*. On the other hand, the Manobos believed in *Ibabasok*, who sees all activities; *Tagbusau*, the god of war; *Taephagan*, the one who watches over their farm; *Sagujun*, the shepherd of a wild animal; *Tagbanwa*, the one who lives on the side, and *Taegbusok*, the spirit that sucks blood (Solivio and Ortega, n.d: 51).

According to Arnel Pasilan who is the museum in-charge and tourism planner of Agusan del Sur, the *Manobos* highly revered *Diwata* (a nature spirit). In this regard, they conduct a ritual called *Panawagtawag*. This is a kind of thanksgiving ritual. Jake Keith Adrian M. Jamera, Muhmin Michael E. Manting and Mark Lloyd G. Dapar explain, “This ritual has three stages; before cleaning the area or field, before planting, and before harvesting... This ritual is observed to safeguard the person or family while cleaning the area, to have bountiful crops before planting, and to give thanks for the good harvest and a successful season” (Jamera, Manting, Dapar, 2020: 45).

Moreover, there are also superstitious beliefs among the Visayan in ADS. For instance, they believe in the old practice of kissing the hands of the old folks. They build the fire to produce smoke, and walking through the smoke before leaving the cemetery after the visit to a deceased loved one. There is also a prohibition of taking a bath while the dead body of their close relative is still at the wake (Andres, 2007: 16-17).

### 2.4 *The Christianization of Agusan*

Historically, Christianization began in Linao (present-day Bunawan). In 1624, the Augustinian Friar Fray Jacinto de San Fulgencio, with eight Augustinian Friars, forced the people in Linao to abandon their customs and rites by seizing the *Diwata*. The people of Linao tried to offer the friar a considerable quantity of gold to ransom their god. However, Fray Jacinto refused their offer and took a boat to Butuan, bringing with him their *Diwata*. The people went to look for him in Butuan to get back their god, but some were convinced to convert and accepted the new religion. Because of this, the Augustinian missionaries erected a mission house in Bunawan, called Santa Clara de Monte Falco, the first Catholic convent in the province of ADS (Provincial Tourism, n.d: 8).

Regarding this early effort of Christianization, Pedro de S. Francisco de Asis gives the following information:

Fray Jacinto de S. Fulgencio and Agustin de S. Pedro (*el Padre Capitan*) decided to put up their residence in Linao...All there received the faith, and for that reason, they became the target of attacks by their pagan neighbors in the forests... Fray Agustin started training his parishioners in the arts of military tactics (Schreurs, 1989: 139).

Furthermore, in 1879 Father Saturnino Urios, SJ took charge of the mission along the Agusan river in his capacity as superior of the Jesuit (Schreurs, 1994: 264). He is oftentimes called the “Apostle of Agusan,” for his missionary zeal. In this regard, Peter Schreurs says:

Father Urios was a man of great courage and abilities and spoke the Manobo language as well as the natives, he succeeded easily in convincing the hearts of the pagans. He took up residence in Bunauan [Bunawan] and made it the center of his apostolic undertaking. With a crew of Christians and a few people with some education from that place, he set out (Schreurs, 1994: 272).

Thus, because of his missionary zeal, many Manobos became Christians. In appreciation of his missionary zeal, his name is used as the name of the school and the university in Agusan del Sur and the university in Agusan del Norte.

Eventually, the Christianization of the Philippines by the Spaniards left a legacy of religious customs and practices up to the present day in Agusan. There are at least eleven customs and practices. (1) Giving honor to Patron Saints through fiesta celebrations; (2) remembering the dead by way of offering novenas, *Pamisa*, and flowers during the death anniversary and especially every November 2, which is locally called *Pista Minatay* or All Souls Day; (3) Misa de Gallo; (4) *Media Noche*, a special meal for the whole family at midnight of December 24; (5) Gift-giving during Christmas time; (6) Caroling of children; (7) *Flores de Mayo*; (8) San Juan celebration every 24<sup>th</sup> of June; (9) *Panaad*, where a devotee of a particular patron saint lights candles or offers a mass; (10) Holy Week celebration; and (11) the common practice among the Agusan folks to make the sign of the cross when passing a Church or cemetery (Solivio and Ortega, n.d: 51-52).

### **3. Mission in the SVD Parishes in ADS**

#### **3.1 A Brief History**

The history of the SVD parishes in ADS can be divided into two 25-year

periods, namely, the first period (1972-1997) and the second period (1997-2022).

*a. The First Period (1972-1997)*<sup>4</sup>

Sometime in 1970, there were three invitations to the SVD to come to Mindanao. These invitations came from Bishop Reginald Arliss, CP of Marbel, Bishop Joseph W. Regan, MM of Tagum, and Bishop Carmelo Dominador Flores Morelos, DD of Butuan. In 1971, the SVD provincial, Fr. Federico Limon, SVD visited the area of Tagum and Trento. Based on his observation, he chose Trento which is part of the Diocese of Butuan because the area was much poorer parishes than in the Diocese of Tagum and in the Diocese of Marbel. In 1972, the first SVD team came to Trento, composed of Fr. Gregorio Fabia, SVD, Fr. Maxsimo Abalos, SVD and Bro. Augustinus Larido, SVD. They took over the administration of the place from the MSC missionaries. The last MSC in Trento was Fr. Hoff, MSC.

According to the Memorandum of Agreement between the Bishop of Butuan and the SVD in 1978, Most Rev. Carmelo D.F. Morelos, DD requested the SVD to take over full pastoral jurisdiction over two parishes. The first was St. Francis Assisi parish in Trento, which included the areas of Veruela and Sta. Josepha. The second was St. Joseph parish in Bunawan, which included the areas of La Paz, Loreto and Binucayan.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in the beginning, only two parishes and five mission stations were under the administration of the SVD. Trento became a mission center of the SVD missionaries in ADS. Eventually, four of the five mission stations became parishes in 1985, and the fifth mission station became a parish in 1986.

In its apostolic activities, from 1972 until 1977, the mission of SVD in ADS focused on the administration of the sacraments (fiesta masses, weddings, baptisms, funeral masses) and the Christian Community Seminars (CCS). At that time, the “Cursillo” (short courses on Christianity) seemed to be for the “elite” only, and CCS was perceived to be for everybody. The target participants of CCS were the “mansebedo” weddings (couples who had been living together but had not yet gotten married in Catholic Church). After the mass

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4 See Pio Eugenio, “25 Years the SVD Presence in Agusan,” (Trento: SVD District House, n.d).

5 See Memorandum of Agreement, signed by Fr. Henry Heekeren, SVD (General Superior) and Bishop Carmelo D. F. Morelos, DD (Bishop of Butuan City). This Memorandum is taken from the office of the SVD district secretary in Trento.

wedding, their children were baptized on the same day.

From 1978 until 1980, the apostolic activities of the parishes focused on four ministries, namely, the family apostolate, the formation of lay ministers or "Alagad," the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO), and the Tribal Filipino Apostolate. In those times, the SVD mission in ADS was the animator for the Tribal Filipino Apostolate of the diocese. The first coordinator of this animation was Bro. Felix Autentico, SVD.

From 1980-1997, the apostolic activities concentrated on six areas. The first area was the socio-economic apostolate, focusing on the formation of a cooperative that was named St. Francis of Assisi Multipurpose Cooperative Incorporated (SFAMPCI). The second was the medical mission apostolate. The third was resistance to "developmental aggression": anti-militarization campaign; anti-palm oil campaign, especially in Loreto led by Fr. Cesar Legazpi, SVD; anti-Tagum Agricultural Development Company (TADECO) banana plantation campaign headed by Fr. Joseph Audiencia, SVD in Sta. Josepha Parish; anti-illegal logging campaign in La Paz led by Fr. Mario Estorba, SVD. The fourth was the SVD Agusan Youth Apostolate (SVD-AYA). The fifth was the Manobo Development Center which was coordinated by Fr. Rudy Tagaro, SVD. And the sixth was Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation (JPIC), which included human rights and social justice issues, the Organic Diversified Scientific Cooperative (ODISCO), the *Magsasakang Sintipikong Pang-Aggricoltura Agham* (MASIPAG) program, and the Livelihood Development, Environmental Conservation and Social Development Apostolate.

During those times, the SVD mission partner was the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (FMM). The partnership started in 1974. The FMM helped the parishes in pastoral works for training lay leaders, conducting seminars, organizing BEC, and giving recollection (Astacaan, interview on December 27, 2022). Besides this, there were also heroes of the faith in ADS, in the persons of Fr. Cesar Legazpi, SVD, the former parish priest of Loreto, Fr. Mario Estorba, SVD, a victim of salvaging, the former parish priest of La Paz, and Mr. Rodrigo Mordeno, a victim of salvaging in Sta. Josepha.

In this period, it is important to mention that in 1996, the St. Francis Assisi Parish in Trento was turned over to the Diocese of Butuan. However, the St. Jude Tadeo Chapel, which was part of the St. Francis Assisi Parish in Trento became the Sta. Maria Parish, which remains under the administration of the SVD. Thus, in this period, there were still seven parishes under the administration of the SVD.

**b. *The Second Period (1997-2022)***

The second 25-year period extends from 1997 until the year 2022, when the SVD celebrated the Golden Jubilee of its presence in ADS. According to Marcelo Cattáneo, one of the focuses of the mission in 1995-2005 was the formation of lay leaders. The SVD parishes had constituted a formation team to reach out to all communities and had animated seminars for Catechists, Lay Ministers, Youth, and community members (Cattáneo, interview on September 27, 2022). The parishes also put attention on the bible apostolate (Bucia, interview on October 8, 2022). In 2003, Sta Josepha Parish was turned over to the Diocese of Butuan.

In 2006-2007, the SVD parishes organized a training program for lectors and commentators for all chapels so that they could facilitate the celebration of the Word (*Kasaulogan*) in the absence of priests who could celebrate mass. In 2008-2012, the SVD parishes organized Organic Farming. The purpose of this organization was to lessen the expenses of farmers by no longer using synthetic fertilizers (Astacaan, interview on December 27, 2022). In 2009, the St. Joseph the Worker Parish in Bunawan was turned over to the Diocese of Butuan. In 2010, FMM Sisters left the mission in ADS (Astacaan, interview on December 27, 2022).

From 2011 until 2013, the focus of the SVD parishes apostolate was on youth ministry, supporting education for the indigenous people, and helping parishioners to have better incomes (Yustinus, interview on October 3, 2022). The SVD apostolate was also extended to the victims of natural calamities. When Typhoon Pablo hit ADS on December 4, 2012, the parish facilities were destroyed, and therefore, the parish programs and activities were interrupted. Although the parishes were affected, they were still able to help the people by distributing relief goods (Yustinus, interview on October 3, 2022).

In 2011, the Missionary Sisters of Mary (MSM) created a mission station in Veruela. It was opened upon the request of Fr. Pete Medina, SVD. It aimed at the pastoral ministry in the parish, particularly the spiritual formation of lay leaders and members of the different ministries. Due to Typhoon Pablo, which caused much damage to the sisters' convent, and also due to a lack of personnel, the MSM mission station was closed. Thus, the MSM sisters were in Veruela for one and a half years only (Acosta, 2021, 161).

From 2012 until 2015, the focus of the mission was on the incorporation of the BEC in the SVD Parishes (Rebayla, interview on September 25, 2022). During this time, in San Isidro Labrador Parish, Binucayan, the SVD mission lost two chapels due to the threat of the New Peoples' Army (NPA) and the

presence of rebels. Later, the SVD missionaries tried to re-establish the said chapels (Biton, interview on September 28, 2022).

In 2016, the Diocese of Butuan celebrated its Golden Jubilee. In view of this celebration, some activities were organized in ADS, such as *Panaw Duaw* (Pilgrimage) to visit every SVD parish in Agusan, youth activities, and some other activities. In the same year, in the context of the general election in the Philippines, the SVD parishes were involved in Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) (Minutes of the SVD district meeting on June 2, 2016 and April 7, 2016).

In the following year in 2017, in line with the government program against illegal drugs, a strong enforcement against drugs was implemented in the SVD parishes. In the same year, each parish tried to build an authentic and effective Parish Pastoral Council, Parish Finance Council, Parish Formation Team, and Parish Youth Apostolate. The parishes also organized courses on Catechism, Bible, Spirituality, JPIC programs, and Liturgy for the Catechists, Lectors, Acolytes, Altar Servers, and members of the chapel council (Oreñy, interview on September 27, 2022).

From 2017 until 2019, the parish ministry focused on the renovation of Church's building, Youth gathering, Altar Servers gathering, and vocation campaign. The SVD parishes introduced the SVD prayers to the parishioner, such as St. Arnold's Quarter Hour Prayer (Minutes of the SVD district meeting on November 17, 2017).

In 2020, the mission of the SVD parishes was to respond to the effects brought by the Covid-19 pandemic. The parishes took the initiative to share what they received with those who were in need. Such initiative was realized in a feeding outreach program. Masses were celebrated in the convent rather than in the parish church's building (Minutes of the SVD district meeting on April 27, 2020 and September 9, 2020).

Apart from this, the SVD parish in Veruela established the SVD Lay Partners on September 8, 2020. In its beginning, this group was composed of 23 members. At the same time, the Mission calendar was published in order to support the universal mission of the Church.

In line with the celebration of 500 Years of Christianity in the Philippines, some activities were organized in the parish in 2021, such as a seminar for the new Lay Ministers, Catechists, Lectors, Altar Servers, and renovation of some chapels (Minutes of the SVD district meeting on June 9, 2021). In the same year, the SVD mission also started preparation for the Golden Jubilee of the SVD presence in ADS. Some apostolic activities were organized, such as,

*Panaw-Duaw* (Pilgrimage), Lay Ministers assembly, Family Life Apostolate (FLA) Assembly, Vocation promotion, Mission Assembly, Bible Congress, Catechists assembly, and *Laudato Si* activity in cooperation with the diocese. Apart from that, Bishop Cosme Damian Almedilla, DD elevated the St. Joseph Frainademetz Quasi-Parish Sinubong in Veruela as parish. At the same time, as a fruit of the Golden Jubilee, one chapel of Veruela parish in Barangay Sampaguita was made into a mission station (Minutes of the SVD district meeting on November 4, 2021 and February 21, 2022). On August 16, 2022, the Sampaguita mission station became St. Arnold Janssen Quasi-Parish.

### 3.2 Profile of the SVD Parishes in Agusan del Sur (ADS)

At present, the SVD administers six parishes and one quasi-parish in ADS. The section presents a profile of these parishes and quasi-parish providing information about their location, patron saint, population, and pastoral ministries without, however, including their detailed history. These parishes and quasi-parish are the following:

- a. Saint Julian de Toledo Parish, La Paz.
- b. St. Isidro the Farmer Parish, Loreto.
- c. San Isidro Labrador Parish, Binucayan, Loreto.
- d. Immaculate Conception Parish, Veruela.
- e. St. Joseph Freinadementz Parish, Sinubong, Veruela.
- f. St. Arnold Janssen Quasi Parish, Sampaguita, Veruela.
- g. Sta. Maria Parish, Trento.

#### a. *Saint Julian de Toledo Parish, La Paz*<sup>6</sup>

Saint Julian de Toledo parish was erected on March 5, 1985. It is located in the Municipality of La Paz. The titular patron is St. Julian de Toledo.

Parish structure:

Catholic Population	17,688
Households	1,839
Zones	4

<sup>6</sup> This data is taken from the parish office in La Paz, Agusan del Sur, Philippines.

Chapels	21
BECs	51
Family Groupings	153
Non-Catholic Christian denominations	13,720
Other Religions	9
Indigenous peoples	10,000

**Pastoral ministry:**

Extraordinary Ministers	45
Lectors	250
Altar Servers	182
Catechists	50
Bible Apostolate Lecturers	7
FLA Counselors	36

The parish also has religious organizations, namely, (1) Knight of Columbus, (2) Alliance of Two Hearts, (3) Children of Mary, (4) Couples for Christ, and (5) Parish Formation Team (PFT). These ministries and organizations give vitality to the parish formation programs, as well as to the social needs of the parish. The parish work still depends mainly on the priests. The parish continues to develop each infrastructure of the Church’s building and each chapel. House-to-house visitation is one of the mission strategies of the parish.

In addition, the parish has a program that helps the people, which is called “Give me water.” It aims to supply water tanks for each chapel (Nguyen, interview on September 26, 2022). The parish also has contributed two priests to the SVD, namely Fr. Rudy Montadas, SVD (who has, however, left the priesthood) and Fr. Mark Cabang, SVD, and a number of seminarians.

**b. St. Isidore the Farmer Parish, Loreto<sup>7</sup>**

St. Isidore the Farmer Parish is located in the Municipality of Loreto. The

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7 This data is taken from the parish office in Loreto, Agusan del Sur, Philippines.

name of the municipality, “Loreto,” was given by Fr. Saturnino Urios, SJ when he visited this place. The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC) were the first to establish the ministry there when it was still a chapel. Then it was entrusted to the SVD in 1972 for pastoral and missionary activities. In 1986, this chapel became a parish. The titular patron is St. Isidore the Farmer. It was canonically erected in 1986.

Parish structure:

Catholic Population	15,237
Households	5,888
Zones	6
Chapels	32
BECs	155
Family Groupings	155
Non-Catholic Christian denominations	3,876
Other Religions	29
Indigenous peoples	11,501

Pastoral ministry:

Extraordinary Ministers	70
Lectors	150
Altar Servers	180
Catechists	80
Bible Apostolate Lecturers	10
FLA Counselors	6

The parish also has religious organizations, namely, (1) Knight of Columbus, (2) Alliance of Two Hearts, and (3) Parish Formation Team (PFT).

In some activities of the parish, the Local Government Unit (LGU) of Loreto gives financial support. Some big activities are held in this parish, such as the gathering of youth ministry and the culmination of the celebration of the Golden Jubilee of SVD presence in ADS. One SVD priest, namely, Fr. Reyann Orlandez, SVD and some seminarians hail from this parish.

**c. San Isidro Labrador Parish, Binucayan, Loreto<sup>8</sup>**

San Isidro Labrador Parish is located in the Municipality of Loreto. Historically, sometime in 1968, a chapel was built in the barangay Binucayan, organized by Mrs. Esing Curang. Fr. Hoff, MSC, the parish priest of Trento visited this chapel regularly. In 1974, the SVD Missionaries, namely Fr. Maximo Abalos, SVD, Bro. Augustin Larido, SVD, Fr. Pio Eugenio, SVD, and Fr. William Vergoosen, SVD came to continue the mission in Binucayan. Eventually, in 1985, this chapel became a parish. The titular patron is San Isidro Labrador.

Parish structure:

Catholic Population	3,544
Households	1,000
Zones	2
Chapels	18
BECs	27
Family Groupings	70
Non-Catholic Christian denominations	1,514
Other Religions	1
Indigenous peoples	4,000

Pastoral ministry:

Extraordinary Ministers	49
Lectors	126
Altar Servers	150
Catechists	73
Bible Apostolate Lecturers	51
FLA Counselors	5

The parish has religious organizations, namely, (1) Knight of Columbus, Widows of the Lord, (2) Handmaids of Mary, (3) Parish Base Health Program and (4) Mutual Fund.

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<sup>8</sup> This data is taken from the parish office in Binucayan, Agusan del Sur, Philippines.

The parish also faces problems like the long distance between one chapel and another chapel, peace and order disturbance due to the presence of the New People's Army (NPA) (Ziem and Biton, interview on October 10, 2022 and September 28, 2022), the lack of infrastructure, and facilities, and limited means of communication (Yustinus, interview on October 3, 2022). Fr. Ronne Baleli, SVD hails from this parish.

#### **d. Immaculate Conception Parish (ICP), Veruela<sup>9</sup>**

The Immaculate Conception Parish was canonically erected in 1985. However, the SVD missionaries had been serving in this place since 1976. This parish takes Immaculate Conception as its patron saint.

Parish structure:

Catholic Population	12,811
Households	2,977
Zones	5
Chapels	30
BECs	56
Family Groupings	274
Non-Catholic Christian denominations	3,963
Other Religions	22
Indigenous peoples	7,294

Pastoral ministry:

Extraordinary Ministers	64
Lectors	135
Altar Servers	215
Catechists	42
Bible Apostolate Lecturers	5
FLA Counselors	25

<sup>9</sup> This data is taken from the parish office in Veruela, Agusan del Sur, Philippines.

The parish has religious organizations, namely, (1) Knight of Columbus, Divine Mercy, (2) Alliance of Two Hearts, (3) FMM Lay Partners, and (4) SVD Lay Partners.

Fr. Anthony Salas, SVD, and one deacon, namely, Rev. Jason Felice of the Piarist Fathers, come from this parish. Also, from this parish is one religious sister of the Missionary Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus (MSM) and another of the Congregation of Benedictine Sisters of Eucharist King (OSB).

Financially, the parish has resources to carry out its missionary work. This condition allows the parish to support some poor families and help the chapels under its care. In collaboration with SVD Lay partners, the parish supports some seminarians and religious sisters in formation. Even though the Franciscan Missionary of Mary (FMM) Sisters have left the parish, the parish maintains the FMM Lay partners who engage in different fields of pastoral activities like, prayer, liturgy, evangelization for the children, and charitable activities.

**e. St. Joseph Freinademetz Parish, Sinubong, Veruela<sup>10</sup>**

St. Joseph Freinademetz parish is located in the Municipality of Veruela. It was canonically erected as a quasi-parish on February 3, 2016, and as a parish on October 29, 2021. Its titular Patron is St. Joseph Freinademetz.

Parish structure:

Catholic Population	6,929
Households	2,132
Zones	4
Chapels	16
BECs	28
Family Groupings	52
Non-Catholic Christian denominations	1,101
Indigenous peoples	1,348

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<sup>10</sup> This data is taken from the parish office in Sinubong, Agusan del Sur, Philippines.

Pastoral ministry:

Extraordinary Ministers	40
Lectors	80
Altar Servers	120
Catechists	43
FLA Counselors	10

As a new parish, the focus of its mission is the formation of lay people and the development of infrastructures in the parish Church and the chapels. The participation of lay people is significant in helping the parish ministry and the needs of the parish. (Keban, interview on October 6, 2022). Fr. Franlou Bardon, SVD, hails from this parish.

**f. St. Arnold Janssen Quasi-Parish, Sampaguita, Veruela<sup>11</sup>**

Before becoming the St. Arnold Janssen Quasi Parish, this quasi-parish was named San Roque Chapel. Fr. Hoff, MSC, from Trento, visited the chapel from time to time. In 1972, the SVD took it over. On March 25, 2022, it became a mission station, and on August 16, 2022, a quasi-parish.

Parish structure:

Catholic Population	4,965
Households	907
Zones	3
Chapels	11
BECs	24
Family Groupings	74

Pastoral ministry:

Extraordinary Ministers	19
Lectors	91
Altar Servers	60

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<sup>11</sup> This data is taken from the parish office in Sampaguita, Agusan del Sur, Philippines.

Catechists	18
FLA Counselors	24

As a new quasi-parish, it is organizing the election of its officers, as well as a Christian leadership seminar, and focuses on the construction of the Church and office (Marquez, interview on October 3, 2022). It is also working to strengthen the Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC) and establish the apostolate structures that provide pastoral care for its members.

**g. Sta. Maria Parish, Trento<sup>12</sup>**

Sta. Maria Parish is one of the parishes under the SVD administration that has a big land area in the compound of the parish Church. This parish was canonically erected in 1996. It is dedicated to Blessed Mary and the parochial fiesta is on October 28. Its first parish priest was Fr. Ulrich Schlecht, SVD. Fr. Ulrich describes some difficulties and challenges in this parish by saying, “We faced many problems, few priests, difficult roads, financial shortage, we all were not prepared for facing the problems of politics (NPA). We just did the best we knew and are glad that we did quite well” (Schlecht, interview on October 7, 2022).

Parish structure:

Catholic Population	10,206
Households	2,509
Zones	3
Chapels	21
BECs	52
Family Groupings	152
Non-Catholic Christian denominations	10

Pastoral ministry:

Extraordinary Ministers	33
Lectors	50
Altar Servers	40

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12 The data is taken from the parish office in Sta Maria, Agusan del Sur, Philippines.

Catechists	29
Bible Apostolate Lecturers	5
FLA Counselors	6

The parish also has religious organizations, namely, (1) Knight of Columbus, (2) Alliance of Two Hearts, and (3) Parish Formation Team (PFT).

#### **4. The “Missionariness” of the SVD Parishes in ADS**

This section describes the “missionariness” or missionary character of the SVD parishes in ADS in the light of the notion of a missionary parish as discussed in Chapter II and in the context of their growth and development.

##### **4.1 Poor Church**

Since the beginning, the focus of the SVD mission in ADS was on the poor. The SVD chose the poorest areas in the Diocese of Butuan rather than the established parishes in the Diocese of Tagum and the Diocese of Marbel. In fact, the SVD parishes in ADS are communities of the poor. As Petrus Keban confirms, “Our parish is the Church of the poor because the majority of the people are poor tenants/farmers, and we consider them the privileged recipients of the Gospel. We include them in Church activities through the awareness of participating in the Church as a Church of the poor. We never neglect them” (Keban, interview on October 6, 2022). Albert Ziem confirms this by saying, “The parish is striving in being a Church of the poor. Much attention is given to the poor” (Ziem, interview on October 10, 2022).

Indeed, in its mission, the SVD parishes in ADS have prioritized the poor. Danilo Noval says, “Our parish prioritizes the marginalized and the oppressed. We have parish programs like Justice and Peace Group (JPAP) and JPIC to defend the rights of the poor and to give them seminars to improve their livelihood” (Noval, interview on October 10, 2022). In this way, the Church is experienced as a mother with an open heart.

In this regard, Stanislav Oreñý says, “We try to make the people feel that everyone is welcome and accepted in our parish. We also help them materially (in terms of needs money or food or clothes), but also spiritually (providing opportunities to listen and talk to them).” (Oreñý, interview on September 28, 2022). In this way, the people’s journey of faith is accompanied with mercy and patience.

By striving to be a Church for the poor, the SVD parishes in ADS manifest their fundamental missionary character. However, this SVD mission focus on the poor is not yet completely mission-oriented. This is because the poor are still seen as objects, not as subjects in mission. To be fully missionary, the SVD parishes in ADS need to be, not only a Church for the poor, but also a Church of the poor. This demands an openness to being evangelized by the poor by adopting the perspective of the poor. Being evangelized by the poor is still an ongoing process. SVD missionaries in ADS need conversion from only evangelizing the poor to also being evangelized by the poor.

#### **4.2 *Self-Sufficient and Self-Reliant Parish***

Based on the memorandum of agreement between the Diocese of Butuan and the SVD on July 28, 1978, the Bishop and the SVD agreed that all parochial funds received would be counted as funds of the parish Church. This is to support the SVD community working in the parishes.<sup>13</sup> Because of this memorandum, since the beginning, the SVD missionaries have tried to be self-sufficient and self-reliant in the parish financially. Jaimelito Gealan confirms this by saying, "It was in my time that we bought our mission car without asking a single centavo from the [SVD] province nor from the [SVD] Generalate. We started planning and executing the new parish convent and pastoral center again without asking anything from the [SVD] district, province, nor from Generalate" (Gealan, interview on October 4, 2022).

Furthermore, Semei Rebayla says, "On the economic side, the parishes seem to be self-sufficient. Pastoral programs are sustained without relying on SVD subsidies" (Rebayla, interview on October 25, 2022). In a similar vein, Anthony Salas stresses that lay participation in financial sustainability is growing and developing (Salas, interview on October 3, 2022). Indeed, parishes are self-reliant in terms of funding (Noval, interview on October 10, 2022). Thus, the parishes rely solely on the financial support of the parishioners.

However, while the financial self-reliance of the SVD parishes in ADS is an indication of their missionary character, it also reveals an inward-looking concern for parish maintenance. SVD missionaries in ADS need conversion also in this regard, namely, from an inward-looking concern for maintenance to an outward-looking missionary outreach to people beyond the parish.

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<sup>13</sup> See Memorandum of Agreement, signed by Fr. Henry Heekeren, SVD (General Superior) and Bishop Carmelo D. F. Morelos, DD (Bishop of Butuan City). This Memorandum is taken from the office of the SVD district secretary in Trento, Agusan del Sur, Philippines.

### **4.3 *Community Building***

Throughout the years, many communities, apostolic ministries, and religious organizations in the SVD parishes in ADS have been established. Community building usually starts with family groupings, which later becomes Basic Ecclesial Communities which then develops into chapels, mission stations, quasi-parishes, and finally, parish communities. For instance, in 2016, one of the Immaculate Conception Parish (ICP) Veruela chapels became a quasi-parish and eventually a parish on October 29, 2021. On August 16, 2022, another chapel of ICP Veruela became quasi-parish. These examples are signs of growth and development of forming a community. The purpose of the establishment of quasi-parishes and parishes is to make missionaries closer to the people and pastoral ministries more effective.

An implication of forming a parish community is the development of apostolic ministries and religious organizations. In terms of apostolic ministries, the parishes have Lay Ministers of Communion, Catechists, Lectors, Altar Servers, Bible Apostolate Lecturers, Family Life Apostolate Counselors (FLA), and the Youth. In terms of religious organizations, the parishes have Knights of Columbus, Alliance of Two Hearts, FMM Lay Partners, Children of Mary, Divine Mercy, Widows of the Lord, Handmaids of Mary, and SVD Lay Partners. All of these have been growing and developing in terms of number and services.

Thus, forming the parish community is not only focused on extension but on formation as well. Lay formation is an important concern of the SVD missionaries. Giving seminars for pastoral ministers is a way of enhancing the Christian community. In this regard, the main contribution of the SVD mission is animating lay formation through the SVD characteristic dimensions, namely, Bible Apostolate, Mission Animation, JPIC, and Communication.

Indeed, the forming of communities is one of the focuses of the SVD mission in ADS. This is a significant process of becoming a missionary parish. This process must be done by regularly ongoing formation. However, to be truly missionary, community building must lead to the conversion of structures. The structures of communities, apostolic ministries, and religious organizations must move from the maintenance mode to the missionary mode. In other words, they must be at the service, not of their self-preservation but of evangelization and mission.

### **4.4 *Participation of the Lay***

Participation of the lay people is essential in the parish ministry. This as-

pect is growing and developing in the context of the SVD mission in ADS. For instance, Agus Yustinus says, "I have seen the growth of parishioners' participation and the active involvements of the youth and lay ministers. They have become our mission partners" (Yustinus, interview on October 3, 2022). Furthermore, Stanislav Oreňný emphasizes that he experienced great collaboration with and participation of the parishioners. Thus, together with his confrere, he experienced spiritual growth, cognitive growth, social growth, economic growth, and growth in understanding that lay participation is crucial in being Church (Oreňný, interview on September 28, 2022).

All in all, the signs of the growth and development of lay people are the following: (a) Lay people can give lectures and seminars in the parish (Keban, interview on October 6, 2022). (b) The number of churchgoers increases considerably (Malazarte, interview on October 3, 2022). (c) The awareness of the people to be active in the parish ministry is commendable (Viani, interview on September 30, 2022). (d) Lay people are participative and supportive of the need of the parishes (Noval, interview on October 10, 2022). (e) The youth apostolate is growing and developing in ADS (Bucia, interview on October 8, 2022). (f) The SVD Lay Mission Partners are actively participating in all missionary activities of the parish (Perocho, interview on 6, 2022). (g) The *balik gasa* (love offering) program supports the parish in its mission.

This participation of the lay people has been experienced in the parishes. This participation is still limited to activities and ministries inside the parish. However, to be truly missionary, participation of the lay must extend to collaboration in mission, that is, to activities and ministries directed to people outside the parish. As the Body of Christ, the Church must be a community where there is unity despite the diversity of its members.

## **5. Conclusion**

Some signs of "missionariness" are discernible in the SVD parishes in ADS. However, in general, the SVD parishes are not yet completely mission-oriented. These are the following reasons:

First, the parish communities in the SVD parishes are poor, and in general the SVD parishes have a concern for the poor. However, to be truly missionary, the SVD parishes in ADS need to be, not only a Church **FOR** the poor, but also a Church **OF** the poor. This demands an openness to being evangelized by the poor by adopting the perspective of the poor.

Second, the SVD parishes are able to build many communities. However, to be

truly missionary, community building in the parish must be accompanied by a conversion of structures. In other words, parish structures must be at the service, not of their self-preservation but of evangelization and mission.

Third, the participation of lay people is significant in the SVD parishes. This participation is still limited to activities and ministries inside the parish. However, to be truly missionary, participation of the lay people must extend to collaboration in mission, that is, to activities and ministries directed to people outside the parish.

Thus, the parishes need to undergo a missionary transformation. This means that the parishes should move from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry. More precisely, the parishes should become outward-looking rather than inward-looking, that is to say, concerned not only about their own interests but about the interests of the mission of the universal Church.

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