Columns
Ministry



Sister Veronica visits a Ho tribal village. Motivating young girls and boys for education and employment is one of our main tasks in bringing about societal development. (Tessy Jacob)



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Two years ago, Pope Francis declared that Oct. 1, 2019, would be the beginning of Extraordinary Missionary Month.

Celebrating that month for the first time this year made me ponder my own life as a missionary.

Since childhood, this was how I pictured a missionary: a priest or nun going about in villages, doing simple things with great love, with many kids thronging around them, or sitting and listening to some elderly folks. Or maybe going about treating patients medically. They were all clad in simple attire, with a simple bag hanging on their shoulders.

It was a utopian feel, seeing them from the "other side" — the dramatic assumption of a layperson about the life of a missionary, a life that she herself has not lived yet.

Having this beautiful picture in my imagination, and with the ardent desire to always do so many good deeds, I joined a missionary congregation. And in the past 21 years, I have hardly taken a cloth bag on my shoulder or wandered about in villages, saving souls.

My congregation, the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit, works in 51 countries. And every year, sisters are sent out into other countries as overseas missionaries. A Mission Cross ceremony is held before they leave for the country. We call them "Missionary" — and when I go to my native place, I hear them calling me Missionary!

Who are missionaries? In India, there are more than 100,000 religious, spread across the country. Most of us are religious missionaries while some others are contemplatives or are from semi-contemplative orders. However, everybody is a missionary. After all, every baptized member in the church is a missionary.



Sister Anita visits a Ho tribal house in her social service work. (Tessy Jacob)

But the question is: What mission work are all these 100,000-plus men and women doing? Yes, that's the whole point. Out of 100,000, fewer than 1,000 fall into my imaginary category of "missionary," with a bag on the shoulder and clad in simple attire, sleeping under a tree.

A missionary congregation is a huge network of activities. Hundreds or thousands of individuals work as one unit, even though their work is varied in nature. It's the "charism" of the congregation that binds everyone to work together. Like the organs in the body, everyone has a different role to play. Nobody is least, nor greatest. All are interdependent.

A few months ago, I began a journey visiting our other convents to take photographs for documentation. Although I intended to visit one house, I decided to visit other houses too. It was a long, lonely journey, going through totally unknown places. With my photography equipment, my hands were full, and I was preoccupied with

handling it carefully.

I was on a local bus. At every stop, someone would get off and a few others would climb in. At one point, I thought to myself, what am I, a Keralite, doing here in the interior of Orissa? For whom am I making this trip? Is it a mission work?

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Kerala is a southern state of India, and totally different in geography, ethnicity and linguistics from Orissa in the east. One can easily distinguish a South Indian from a North Indian by their physical features and language accents. Missionaries from the southern states of India have played a vital role in the socioeducational and pastoral development of Orissa.

I didn't find a convincing answer, until recently while I was sitting with one of the sisters who is engaged with administration of the province. She burns many nights worth of oil, just to make sure that all the legal and financial mission activities of other sisters go smoothly. She is vested with that responsibility to help others function properly.

There is another sister who spent most of her life stitching religious habits for other sisters. She was a talented tailor, and willingly did her best, so that on those important days of life a sister could dress well.

There are sisters heading well-established prestigious schools or hospitals. But ever since they took up the responsibility, they have hardly ever enjoyed seven hours of peace at night. We may have associates at our beck and call, but individual responsibility is what makes all our activities fruitful. A sister may be in charge of the kitchen, or a farm, or secretarial work, or in charge of a house, or even just praying for others: Even then, essentially all are missionaries.



Sister Lisha, a nurse, makes regular visits to a nearby health center to give guidance to young mothers. (Tessy Jacob)

Missionary life is – in the words of St. Mother Teresa — "doing small things with great love." Our life is never stagnant; it's recycled. It's a fact that all of us go through "dark nights." The challenges and struggles need not be due to personal differences. Ultimately, we are all constantly on the move, and transfers are inevitable in our life. It's moving by doing. Never getting tired.

When we have finished in one place, it's time to pack up and go to a new place and start all over again. The position of a superior or principal or any authority figure is not permanent. After three or six or 25 years of that service, you leave that title behind.

Jesus says, "When you did it all for the least of your brothers you did it unto me" (Matthew 25:40) — whether that's caring for the planet or for the unborn baby. Around every corner, something or someone is seeking our attention, asking for a helping hand. Do we see it?

The theme of that extraordinary month reminded us of our call and responsibility. In this life, we have a duty to reach out to the other, in however a simple way it is. Let's be a missionary either at home or away from home.

[Tessy Jacob is a member of the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit. She is Indian in nationality, with an interest in evangelization through mass media. Her work/ministry experience has been as a freelance reporter in print media, including TV and film experience. Currently, she is the joint secretary of the Indian Catholic Press Association and serves as the communication coordinator of her home province.]