

# **Apostolate of Witnessing and Women Religious A Synoptic Perspective**

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## **Introduction**

The Church expects a renewed contribution from women especially consecrated women for the future of new evangelization (VC, 58). Opinions vary concerning the interpretation of the participation of women in the ministry of Jesus and their role in the history of salvation. One of the most important contributions of the NT to a proper understanding of the nature and function of women is the idea of discipleship. This article is an attempt to find out the Synoptic understanding of the participation of women in the apostolate of witnessing and it is a challenge to renew, re-orient and re-live the consecration of women religious. So in this article we turn to the Synoptic Gospels to identify the role of women disciples in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. I have no plan to make male-female parallelism, but I would like to pay attention to the significance of the role of women in the life of Jesus through their witness mission.

The article contains four sections. The first section deals with the role of women in the infancy narrative, the second section delves into the synoptic understanding of the role of women followers in the life of Jesus and the third section discusses about the role of women in the death and resurrection of Jesus and the final section analyses the influence of Gospel women in the witness ministry of women religious today.

### **1. The Role of Women in the Infancy Narrative**

Mary, the mother of Jesus (Mt 1:18; Lk 1:27), Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist (Lk 1:5) and Anna, the prophetess (Lk 2:36) are the prominent female figures in the infancy narrative. Three least important people in the society are chosen to play most vital role in the history of salvation: a young peasant girl, a barren wife and an elderly widow. The infancy narrative articulates the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of Elizabeth, Mary and Anna to fulfil their special call. Before the Pentecost, they were filled with the Holy Spirit (Mt 1:18; Lk 1:35, 41b; 2:36) to do their individual mission.

Mary received the message of incarnation and she believed it by saying, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your Word" (Lk 1:38). She believed the message and actively participated in it and witnessed the mystery of incarnation. As Soares Prabhu states, Mary is 'blessed' not because she bore Jesus but because she believed that the promise made to her by the

Lord would be fulfilled.<sup>1</sup> Again the visitation scene (Lk 1:39-45) asserts Mary's firm faith in the plan of God. Legrand's comment on visitation is noteworthy: "the whole burden of the pericope lies on the two women exchanging their faith perception. The narrative goes beyond the level of the mere event to its faith contents, beyond the story of the pregnancies to the revelation imparted to the protagonists."<sup>2</sup> For Luke, Mary is the voice of those oppressed anticipating for the role reversal activity of the Messiah where the oppressors shall be overthrown and the oppressed be exalted. This announcement of the reversal of the social order in God's kingdom can be considered as a prophetic proclamation (Lk 1:46-55). The presence of Mary in the beginning of the period of Jesus (Lk 1:26-38) as a believer and as a prophetic figure is significant in relation to her role as a witness of Jesus. Again her presence in the beginning of the period of the Church (Acts 1:12-14) with the Twelve and others is remarkable, for the reason that, she witnessed the whole Christ-event and its salvific significance.

Like a few others, male or female, Elizabeth is praised for observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations without blame (Lk 1:6). The favour of God (Lk 1:25) made the barren become the mother of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. 'In a loud voice' Elizabeth proclaims, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the

mother of my Lord comes to me?” (Lk 1:42–43). “Exclaimed with a loud cry” (Lk 1:42) is an expression frequently used to describe an inspired utterance (cf. Mk 9:24; Jn 7:28, 37; Rom 8:15; 9:27; Gal 4:6). The Prophecy of Elizabeth regarding the identity of Jesus as *kurios* (Lord) is important (Lk 1:41) because *kurios* is used not only of the Risen Jesus (cf. Lk 24:3, 34), but even of Jesus during his ministry (cf. Lk 7:13, 19; 10:1, 39, 41; 11:39; 12:42a; 13:15; 17:5, 6; 18:6; 19:8a, 31, 34; 22:61), at his birth (Lk 2:11), and before his birth (Lk 1:43). Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she witnessed Jesus as Lord. She is the first to acknowledge Mary as the mother of the Messiah. In Acts 2, God has made Jesus ‘Lord’ and ‘Christ’ (cf. Acts 2:36-40) and it gives a clear revelation of the identity of Jesus. The presence of the Spirit made the witnesses to believe the Lordship of Jesus (Acts 2:36-40). Elizabeth believed and witnessed Jesus’ total authority as Lord by calling him *kurios* (Lk 1:41) like the Pentecost community.

Anna, a prophetess lived in the Temple and saw the child Jesus (Lk 2:37-38). She was one of the first to bear witness to Jesus. She is presented as a unique prophetess, who assumes her role along with Miriam, Deborah and Huldah in the salvation history. Even though, the term ‘Spirit’ is not used with reference to Anna, the Spirit’s work is implied (Lk 2:36-38) when she is called as a prophetess and when she proclaimed about the redemption of Israel. She never left the Temple, “but worshiped night and day,

fasting and praying” (Lk 2:37). The evidence of her devotion is not just in the fact that she spent all those years in prayer, but that she *recognized* the Christ. She started to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem (Lk 2:36-38). The Spirit reveals to Anna the identity of Jesus and she interprets the significance of Jesus’ birth to those waiting for the messianic liberation (Lk 2:36-38). Anna’s action of speaking made her the messenger of the Saviour as it is in the life of the witnesses in Acts 2.

In the infancy narrative of Luke, these female figures introduced the coming of the Messiah of Israel before and after his advent (cf. Lk 1:41-45; 47-55; 67-80; 2:25-32, 36-38). Thus, in Lk 1:15, 41-42, 67 and 2:25-26, 36-38, the Spirit acts as the Spirit of prophecy, inspiring prophetic speech.<sup>3</sup> The mission entrusted to the Spirit-inspired figures in Luke 1-2 made them pneumatic and prophetic characters. Mary, Elizabeth and Anna are all in different ways singled out as inspired by the Holy Spirit to believe and witness to the significance of Jesus’ birth. These minor characters too can be seen as foreshadowing the prophetic witness to Jesus which is the main subject of Acts, and which receives its final vindication in Paul’s last debate in Rome.<sup>4</sup> The Lucan narration of the importance of the role of women in the infancy narrative argues that the Evangelist’s treatment is really favourable to women. And the women who played significant role in the mystery of

incarnation are the bridge figures in the history of salvation. Their mission was not only to witness the events surrounding the birth of Jesus, but also to participate actively in God's messianic purposes. Being filled with the Spirit, they witnessed the mystery of incarnation.

## **2. Synoptic Understanding of Women Followers of Jesus**

According to Mark and Matthew, in the crucifixion narrative, the women are characterized as the people "who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him" (cf. Mk 15:40; Mt 27:55), but in Luke the Galilean women are mentioned at the end of the Galilean ministry of Jesus (cf. Lk 8:1-3). Of all the Gospels, Luke records the most prominent appearances of women.<sup>5</sup> The Synoptics and John agree that the women were with Jesus throughout the course of his ministry. There are many references about women in the Synoptic Gospels but the women followers of Jesus from Galilee are our main concern because it is the basic source to interpret the discipleship of women recorded in the Bible.

The social and cultural context of the first century Mediterranean world is entirely different from today's world. Women were considered as marginalized group in the Jewish culture.<sup>6</sup> As a whole, women were considered inferior to men, evidence of which we find in the OT and in the inter-testamental literature. Although, the NT reports about the participation of women in the life of the Church,

it is opposite to the general standard of the period. The participation of women in the life of the Church is significant in relation with their contribution to the growth of the Church.

## **2. 1. The Women followed and served Jesus from Galilee**

The Gospels present Jesus' life as a single journey that begins in Galilee and proceeds to Jerusalem, where Jesus is executed. All the four Gospels attest to the presence of women at the cross. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem (Mk 15:40-41, 47; Mt 27:55-61; Lk 23:49-56; Jn 19:25-27). Brown argues that this information about the women followers is recorded here in order to clarify their identity because they have not been previously mentioned.<sup>7</sup> For Luke, women are also disciples who possess all essential qualities required of a disciple. It is true that the Synoptic Gospels neither use the term *mathētēs* to refer to women disciples nor mention the specific call they received from Jesus just as the Twelve had. But, there is no clear definition of discipleship in the NT. The concept of discipleship is expressed in the Synoptic Gospels through the words like *mathētēs* (disciple),<sup>8</sup> *ōsin meta autou* (to be with him), *akoloutheō* (to follow, to go behind someone), *diakoneō* (to minister, to serve), etc. Among these technical terms, 'to follow' (*akoloutheō*) and 'to serve' (*diakoneō*) are obviously applied to the women followers (Mt 27:55; Mk 15:41; Lk 8:1-3) in the Synoptic Gospels.

### 2.1.1. Discipleship as to follow (*akoloutheō*) Jesus

The verb *akoloutheō* (to follow) is one of the significant technical expressions denoting discipleship in the Synoptic theology. It literally means 'to follow,' 'to go behind' and derivatively, 'to follow intellectually' or 'morally.'<sup>9</sup> Thus, one follows an orator in thought, or a wise man or a friend or a lover conveyed by the expression *akoloutheō*. Epictetus, a stoic philosopher, used the verb *akoloutheō* to indicate for following God (*Discourses* 1. 30. 4).<sup>10</sup> When the verb *akoloutheō* used of individuals, it denotes the beginning of discipleship in the sense of a pupil who subordinates himself to a teacher.<sup>11</sup>

The verb *akoloutheō* is used in all the Gospels for more than a physical act; it denotes the spiritual allegiance of the disciple (cf. Lk 5:27-28; 9:23, 49, 57, 61; 18:22, 28, 43; 22:39, 54). From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus calls people to 'follow' him (cf. Mk 1:16-20; 2:13-17; Mt 9:9). It is an event, a condition, or a status, which is initiated by Christ himself. 'A call from Jesus' and 'a literal following behind Jesus' marked as two significant characteristics of the Gospel discipleship. In the Gospels, *akoloutheō* is a direct invitation by Jesus to follow him (Mt 8:22; 9:9; 19:21) irrespective of space and time. What is impressive here is the tremendous emphasis on Jesus' initiative. The call scene is introduced abruptly, with the simplest grammatical connection *kai* (and) and with no anticipatory references of any kind. As a result, the discipleship emerges as a status which is created exclusively by Jesus and which starts by

a personal calling issued by Jesus. This calling is strongly underlined by the absence of any dialogue, and by the predominance of imperatival forms in the phrasing of the invitation (Mk 1:17; 2:14). In all cases the answer to the call is immediate and radical.<sup>12</sup>

Similar to the male disciples (Mt 4:19, 21; 9:9), the women also follow Jesus: 'they had followed Jesus' (Mt 27:55). But in the case of the women, the evangelists do not specify if the women's following of Jesus is in response to a direct call from Jesus. We have no description of Jesus' calling of any woman to follow him. But we have indication that some women followed Jesus and the same verb *akolouthēō*, which is used to point to the call of the Twelve, is used here to indicate the following of the women.<sup>13</sup> This technical term points to the idea that the women's following was similar to the following of other disciples. They are included as the members of the wider group of disciples because they have continually followed Jesus. Women have left their families to follow Jesus and they have accompanied him to Jerusalem. These women followers are to be fashioned as participants in Jesus' own mission, to proclaim the Gospel of the kingdom of God and they witnessed the earthly ministry of Jesus.

Again the pericope (Lk 8:1-3) provides further information about the women's following. The whole passage revolves around the group theme. The group is composed of Jesus, the Twelve and the women. Attention must be drawn

to the fact that the two components of the group are the Twelve and the women. The on-going presence of traveling companions 'with' Jesus included the women companions too. They were constantly 'with him' (*syn auto*). This is consonant with Lk 23:49, 55 and with the other Synoptics (Mt 27:55; Mk 15:40) which provide indication about the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee. Luke uses different phrases to speak of the companions of Jesus such as "those who were around him" (Lk 22:49), "all his acquaintances" (Lk 23:49), "all the rest" (Lk 24:9) and "those who were with them" (Lk 24:33). These phrases are redactional formulation of the Evangelist.<sup>14</sup> Women's act of following Jesus in Lk 8:2 provides them an opportunity to be with him and to become the companions of Jesus like the other disciples.

The women who followed Jesus are from Galilee. Galilee is known as the place of discipleship because the master started his ministry from Galilee and also he called his first disciples from there. It is the cradle of the discipleship in the Gospels. The phrase 'from Galilee' gives us the impression that the women's following of Jesus was a constant following.<sup>15</sup> Physical following of Jesus was a necessary feature for discipleship according to the Gospels. The Galilean women have been with him from the beginning of his ministry; they have heard his words and seen his actions. Besides moving Jesus toward the goal of his mission, the travel account contains a collection of sayings,

parables, pronouncement stories and other materials, which Jesus uses for the further training of the disciples. They must be prepared for their future work as witnesses and evangelizers, spreading the Good News.<sup>16</sup> Their ongoing role as Jesus' followers<sup>17</sup> placed them in a significant role as the witnesses of Jesus.

### 2. 1. 2. Discipleship as to serve (*diakoneō*) Jesus

Another important qualification of the women disciples is that 'they served (*diakoneō*) Jesus' (cf. Mt 26:55; Mk 15:41; Lk 8:3). If *akoloutheō* refers to the following of Jesus, *diakoneō* (to serve) refers to service rendered to Jesus. The verb *diakoneō* or the noun *diakonia* is used by Luke in 4:39; 10:40; 12:37; 17:18; Acts 6:2 in the sense of waiting at table or seeing to hospitality. The one who serves meals is usually the person who has the lowest social status in the group. This comparison suggests that the women have taken the positions of lower status within the discipleship group and have not held positions of power. Shottroff argues that the term *diakoneō* must have a wider range of meaning than traditional household work, since Jesus and his disciples were an itinerant group who were poor and homeless.<sup>18</sup> Although, the women may have prepared and served food during the mission, Schottroff is right to stress that the women are not portrayed in conventional roles, since they have left their homes to travel with a group of women and men who are not their relatives. In Acts 6:1-6, the seven are appointed to relieve the Twelve of food service. But

Acts 6:8-7:60 and 8:26-40 prove that the two of the seven, Stephen and Philip, involved in view of preaching, teaching and baptizing activity. So from this perspective, we can argue that the term *diakoneō* used for women in the Gospels does not mean that they are only serving at the tables. Like the seven in the Acts, the women also might have involved in the teaching ministry.

For Mark, *diakoneō* does not characteristically have to do with table service, for its sense varies according to context. The passage in which it is most likely to bear this sense is Mk 1:31, where Simon's mother-in-law, on being healed, served them. In the setting of the home, it can be expected that she had recovered sufficiently to play the part of a hostess. The verb *diakoneō* is a key discipleship term in Jesus' teaching, particularly in the section in which he is on the way to Jerusalem. During this journey, Jesus teaches his disciples that they should take on the role of a servant (Mk 9:35; 10:43). In Mk 10:45, the word *diakonēsai* clearly applies to the total ministry of Jesus as self-giving in the service of others.<sup>19</sup> Its purpose is not to subordinate and enslave others in the manner of gentile overlords (Mk 10:42), but to be their servant and slave who frees and elevates them from servitude (Mk 10:44-45). Here then *diakonēsai* is of the essence of the messianic ministry in which disciples are called upon to participate, which is to say, it is of the essence of discipleship. Discipleship is a serving (*diakoneō*) of Jesus, a function of diligent and

unfailing service. Service will remain a fundamental and vital principle within the Christian community: "And he (Jesus) sat down and called the Twelve; and he said to them, if anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (Mk 9:35).

In Lk 8:3, the explicit reference to possessions (cf. Lk 11:21; 12:15, 33, 44; 14:33; 16:1; 19:8; Acts 3:6; 4:32, 34, 37; 5:4) suggests that the women financially supported Jesus and the Twelve.<sup>20</sup> The *diakonia* of the Galilean women is interpolated in the context of the evangelizing activity of Jesus and of the Twelve (Lk 8:1): one could describe them as 'proto-deaconesses.'<sup>21</sup> The women were the active contributors or supporters for the proclamation of the kingdom of God (Lk 8:1-3). The *diakonia* acclaims the women for their faithfulness and commitment to the Lord. It values their ministry as a partnership in the proclamation of the Gospel.<sup>22</sup> Being with Jesus in turn helped them to identify with him gradually, particularly with his sensitivity to the needs of others. They were ready to meet the needs of the group.

The call to discipleship is not a call to a static position of honour, power and glory, but a call to a dynamic work of *diakonia*, of care for other people. The emphasis is on service as care for the others, as love, as being aware of the needs of the community. The priority of *diakonia* emphasizes the basic fact that discipleship is not an opportunity for individualistic moral perfection but for a new orientation

in life in which the others, the community become the centre of attention and love.

The discipleship of the Galilean women is a model for the whole community of both women and men. This interesting combination of 'following' and 'service' leads us to understand the significant role of the women disciples. The expression 'women from Galilee' refers to their continued physical following of Jesus from the beginning of Jesus' ministry itself. Their presence at cross and later at the tomb of Jesus indicates that these women followed Jesus until the end of his pre-Easter ministry.<sup>23</sup> Their active participation in the pre-Easter ministry of Jesus is noticeable in relation with their discipleship.

## **2. 2. The Women were Present at the Cross and at the Tomb**

Mark and Luke link the crucifixion with the resurrection by having the women note the place of Jesus' burial so that they could go, prepare the spices, and, after the Sabbath, return to anoint the body. But Matthew writes that the unnamed woman had anointed Jesus for his burial (Mt 26:12), so that no further anointing was necessary. The presence of the women at the burial scene is evident in Synoptic Gospels with slight differences. Mark concludes the burial scene with the notice of the women who "saw where he was laid" (Mk 15:47). Luke presents this scene similar to Mark (cf. Lk 23:55). Distinct from Mark, Matthew's

burial scene concludes with a remarkable narration that the women were “sitting in front of the sepulchre” (Mt 27:61).

The Matthean expression of “sitting in front of the sepulchre” (Mt 27:61) is interesting because the verb *kathēmai* deserves particular attention in relation with discipleship. The use of the phrase ‘to sit at the feet of’ (cf. Lk 10:39) is significant since evidence shows this is a technical formula meaning ‘to be a disciple of’ (cf. Mk 3:14). The verb *kathēmai* means ‘to sit,’ ‘to set down,’ etc.<sup>24</sup> In the OT, ‘sitting’ was considered to be an act of grief and mourning (cf. Job 2:12, 14; Ps 137:1) which was held as a customary role of women in antiquity.<sup>25</sup> So, many of the scholars interpret the presence of the women at the tomb of Jesus in terms of the lamentation of the dead (Mt 27:61).<sup>26</sup> The scholars like L. Sabourin, J. P. Heil, D. Senior, D. E. Garland and L. Morris interpret the women’s posture of sitting in front of the tomb in terms of witnessing. They are faithful witnesses to both the death and the burial of Jesus.<sup>27</sup> Matthew here presents the women as having followed Jesus constantly (27:55–56) and cared for him by being with him until the end (27:61).

The women were the last remaining followers of Jesus, and they were the only ones to visit the tomb. The anointing of the dead is a last act of intimacy, carried out by the closest to the dead person (Ezek 16:9; 2 Chr 16:14; Josephus, *Ant.* 16. 61). The practice of anointing is intended to give honour to the dead, and has connotations of worship. They

are the only followers of Jesus who can testify that Jesus was buried and rose from death, and the proclamation of the Gospel depends upon their witness. The women are the only witnesses of the events of the passion narrative who have also been present during Jesus' mission in Galilee and on his journey to Jerusalem. The women at the tomb are portrayed more courageously than the male disciples, since they remain faithful to Jesus at his crucifixion and burial, and they are the first of his followers to hear the news of the resurrection.

The empty tomb account provides the necessary transition between Jesus' death and his resurrection from the dead. This narrative must be seen in the light of the resurrection accounts; the disappearance of the body is not important but the divine message of the resurrection is significant. The women's qualification to be future witnesses of the empty tomb is stressed, when it is said that they followed Joseph, saw the tomb, and exactly how his body was laid (cf. Lk 23:55).<sup>28</sup> The women watched and witnessed the death and the burial of Jesus.<sup>29</sup> The seeing of the empty tomb in itself will have no capacity to produce faith. The motive behind this empty tomb narrative is to say that Jesus is alive; this is the proclamation of Easter or the Easter witness. In reality, no one witnessed the resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, finding the tomb empty becomes an authorized sign of witness to his resurrection.

The principal qualifications of the women at the tomb are important: they are the followers of Jesus from Galilee (Lk 23:55); they are the eyewitnesses to the ministry, death and burial of Jesus (Lk 8:2-3; 23:49, 55); and they are the first receivers of Easter message (Lk 24:1-10). Luke's references in 23:49 and 23:55 to the women who followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem are flashbacks to Lk 8:1-3. These women are not only 'witnesses to Jesus' earthly life' but also 'witnesses to Jesus' death.' The observations of Sandiyagu about the Lucan Galilean women are significant:

For Luke, the women of Galilee play an important role in the Gospel by being with Jesus and witnessing personally to his words and deeds. Their constant presence with Jesus helps them to become the generators of Christian kerygma that proclaims the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. They are present in the first Christian community forming a bridge between the story of Jesus and the story of the Church. They are part of the community that received the Spirit entitling them to prophesy. Thus, we argue that Luke lets his readers know through some minute details that he intends to depict the women of Galilee as eyewitnesses. From this perspective, the women of Galilee are *autoptai* (eyewitnesses) in the true sense of the word.<sup>30</sup>

The necessary qualifications for the witnesses of Jesus are mentioned in Acts 1:21-22. These qualifications are

fulfilled in the life of the Galilean women. Their association with Jesus during his life, suffering, death and resurrection made them as valid witnesses of Jesus.<sup>31</sup> So we can argue for their presence in Acts 1:12-14 as well as in Pentecost. In order to justify the witness ministry of the women after resurrection, its development in the pre-Easter, Galilean period of Jesus' life is necessary.

### **3. The Women as Primary Witnesses to Resurrection**

Women are key witnesses of the resurrection in all the Gospel accounts (Mk 16:1-8; Mt 28:1-10; Lk 24:1-11; Jn 20:11-18). But among the Synoptic writers only Luke used the term 'witness' to indicate the mission commission and so we focus on the Lucan narration of resurrection for this analysis. In Luke and Acts, the technical term for 'witness' is *martus* (Lk 24:48; Acts 1:8). Generally a witness (*martus*) is a person who is present at a fact and can be trusted to testify to this fact when called upon before a court of law. From the Christian point of view, we often use the word 'witness' in the missiological perspective. All the developments of mission, evangelism, ecumenism, etc. are called Christian witness. The so-called 'God experience' of the individuals with regard to their conversion is also called testimony or witness in our contemporary world. From the first or second century onwards the Christian martyrs are called witnesses. The word 'witness' is used in different range in our time.

In the NT, the term witness (*martus*) and its cognates often have the usual sense of a witness at a trial (Lk 22:71; Acts 6:13; 7:58; Acts 23:5).<sup>32</sup> The legal tenor of the word *martus* is chiefly related to 'witness to facts.' It means 'witness is a man who can speak about the proofs from his own direct knowledge, especially in legal proceedings.'<sup>33</sup> However, for Luke, the receivers of mission command are introduced as witnesses in Acts 1:8 as well as in Lk 24:48. The shift of the connotation is clear from the context of Lk 24:48 (cf. Acts 1:8) because those who believe and confess that Jesus is Lord are known as witnesses. Luke extended the semantic area of witness far beyond the forensic context. The term 'witness' shifted its usual sense of a witness at a trial to the Christian meaning of the confession and proclamation of Jesus as Lord. The 'being' and the 'doing' of the disciples of the Risen One are introduced by the same term 'witness.'

Jesus' most important concern between the resurrection and his Second Coming is presented in Luke and Acts as the mission of witnessing (Lk 24:48; Acts 1:8, 21-22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39, 41; 13:31-32). Luke calls not only the apostles as *martus* but also Paul (Acts 22:14; 26:15) and Stephen (Acts 22:20). The Evangelist develops a usage according to which the apostles are "witnesses" not only to the outward events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, but also to its salvific meaning according to Scripture.<sup>34</sup> The women indeed were witnesses of Jesus

although they are not particularly designated as *autoptai* (eyewitnesses) or *martus* (witness).

The women at empty tomb do not belong to the group of the Twelve or to the people of the post-apostolic period but they have their distinct role to play, perhaps a more permanent one. "The testimony about the resurrection – which will become an important issue in the rest of the chapter (Lk 24) and in Acts – is thus first made to the women of Galilee."<sup>35</sup> The immediate context of Lk 24:44-49 suggests for an extended group beyond the Eleven to all who were present for the events. It is better to understand the Lucan identity of witnesses in the context of the active participation of women disciples in the life of Jesus. This closeness towards Jesus made the women for further action, that is, to believe and proclaim the resurrection. Resurrection is a faith experience. According to Luke, 'following Jesus on the journey to Jerusalem' means making progress in the life of faith (Lk 8:15; 17:5-6).

The women of Lk 8:1-3 are present with Jesus and are his messengers even when they are not mentioned specifically in the Lucan text. That such is the case is made clear in Lk 24:6-8. In that passage it is said that the women remember the words of Jesus which he spoke to them in Galilee. Now in Lk 9:22 and 18:33-34, which have the closest parallels to the wording of Lk 24:7, there is no specific mention of the presence of women.<sup>36</sup> Lk 24:5b-8 is significant in relation with angelic message; the angel says,

“why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Luke writes, “then they remembered his words” (Lk 24:8). The two disciples at Emmaus mention about this angelic vision as “some women of our group... had seen a vision of angels who said that he is alive” (Lk 24:22-23). The most striking characteristic of Jesus is that ‘he is alive’ (Lk 24:23; Acts 1:3; 25: 19; Rev 1:18) and Luke conveys the message of resurrection through this expression. Jesus does not belong anymore and in any way to the reign of the dead.<sup>37</sup> Luke omits the reference about Jesus’ future appearance in Galilee (cf. Mk 16:7) and introduces a new element in the narration: the passion of Jesus. Here the women were asked to remember the words of Jesus concerning his passion (Lk 24:6-8).

The verb ‘to remember’ (*mimnēskomai*) is used as a command in Lk 24:6 and its observance is seen in Lk 24:8. Generally, the verb *mimnēskomai* has a religious meaning in the OT. Luke’s use of the verb “to remember” in Lk 22:61 and Acts 11:16 suggests that in Lk 24:6,8 we are not dealing with an ordinary recollection of past events. The remembered word of the Lord helps to transform people, to change their opinions of themselves and of God’s ways, and to move along the journey of faith. In Lk 22:61 Peter remembered the word of the Lord which led him on the

way to repentance. In Acts 11:16 it led him to accept God's drastically new revelation that Gentiles were clean and could become believers in Jesus.<sup>38</sup> Applying these considerations to our passage (Lk 24:1-12), through their remembrance of Jesus' words, the women move from perplexity at the sight of the empty tomb to faith in the Easter *kerygma* that Jesus has been raised from the dead.

*Mimnēskomai* is a knowledge which leads to faith.<sup>39</sup> In Jn 2:22, the verb *mimnēskomai* is used as a technical term for the post-resurrection interpretation and understanding of Jesus' words in the light of prophecies.<sup>40</sup> Though Luke does not say that the women believe the resurrection of Jesus but he means it by the words 'they remembered his words.' The verb *mimnēskomai* is a deliberate reflection on the relation between the words and events, the words are taken seriously and the events are rightly evaluated and understood. The words and events illuminate each other. Recollection of Jesus' words is part of the Easter message in Lk 24:44-47. So 'remembrance' is not a simple recollection but a comprehension. Lk 24:6-8 serves the purpose of the author to unfold the witness value of the empty tomb. The hearing of the message is important because it made the women as the witnesses of the resurrection. They received the message of resurrection through an angelic revelation. There is no commissioning of the women to go and communicate to the apostles that Jesus is risen. But their belief in the words of Jesus and the fulfilment of Scripture

made them emissaries to the apostles or the first proclaimers of Christian *kerygma*.

The verb 'to announce' (*apaggellein*) is used in Lk 24:9, for the narration of the experience of the women at the tomb. It means rather 'to announce,' or 'to proclaim,' than 'to tell,' and 'to narrate.'<sup>41</sup> The same verb is used in Mk 16:10, 13 and Mt 28:8, 10 to indicate the proclamation about the appearance of the Risen Jesus. In the Lucan narrative, the women did not receive divine commission to proclaim the resurrection message. Still their companionship with Jesus and remembrance of his words urged them to believe and witness the Easter message. The empty tomb account is not a recognition appearance but it is a mission appearance.

The women stand in a privileged position as first Easter witnesses. They are witnesses of what they have heard than what they have seen. So the angelic message is important than the empty tomb in their witnessing. The receivers of witness command in Lk 24:48 are not only the Twelve but also the group of disciples according to Lk 24:33. Luke uses different phrases to speak of the companions of Jesus such as "those who were around him" (Lk 22:49), "all his acquaintances" (Lk 23:49), "all the rest" (Lk 24:9) and "those who were with them" (Lk 24:33). Witherington claims that, "true discipleship, based on true understanding of Jesus and his mission, was only possible after Easter."<sup>42</sup> Women provide the crucial link between Jesus' death and

resurrection, witnessed the crucifixion and being the first to receive the news that Jesus is risen. It was decisive that the Galilean women's knowledge of Jesus was not superficial, it is personal and intimate. They knew and understood him for who he really is. Their coming to know Jesus was a long process indeed, which was not over until, after his resurrection, they receive the Holy Spirit and witnessed the resurrection. The participation of the women in the pre-Easter ministry of Jesus appears to be allusions in the charges to a later and wider mission of them in the post-Easter period.

The Galilean women, who had discovered the empty tomb and experienced a revelation about Jesus' resurrection, told everything about it to the Eleven and to their associates. Thus, the Galilean women are the first believers as well as the proclaimers of the resurrection of Jesus. So they are considered as the first authentic witnesses, even though Luke does not call them as 'official witnesses' by the term *martus*. The knowledge about his person and mission made the Galilean women become the active participants in the post-Easter ministry of Jesus. Acts of the Apostles speaks about the role of the women in the primitive Church. Acts 1:14 speaks that "all these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers."

#### **4. What is the Role of Women Religious in the Ministry of Witness?**

The implications of the women disciples in the Gospels are not only as models of discipleship in the period of Jesus' earthly ministry, but also as models for missionary discipleship in the period after Easter.<sup>43</sup> The presence of the Gospel women in the life of Jesus proves that the Christian discipleship is not as a once-for-all total change, but as a process to be worked out within the Christian community.<sup>44</sup> The discipleship of the Gospel women starts from the beginning of the earthly ministry of Jesus and it continues through the post-Easter period. The identity of the Gospel women as disciples or constant companions of Jesus is relevant in relation with the ministry of the women religious in the Church today. We try to identify the role of the women religious in the ministry of witness with the help of three characteristics of the Gospel women: 1) The three women at infancy narrative identified and witnessed the Messiah with the help of the Holy Spirit; 2) The Galilean women were able to follow Jesus during his ministry. They helped Jesus and his companions out of their resources (Lk 8:3); 3) The women at the tomb of Jesus witnessed the fact of resurrection and becoming the messengers of resurrection (Lk 24:1-12). Now we attempt to explore the mission of women religious in the ministry of witness in the light of these three characteristics of the Gospel women.

The three women at infancy narrative are the witnesses of the mystery of incarnation. The women at infancy narrative became the people of faith through the presence of the Holy Spirit. The faith in God made these unknown, humble women become the participants of God's plan of salvation. These women are the best examples for the women religious in their witness ministry. The faith in Jesus Christ provides the context and motivation for evangelization. Without faith, evangelization is reduced to development projects, but not evangelizing moments.<sup>45</sup> Whatever may be the apostolate of the consecrated persons, faith can make it as the moments of the proclamation of the Good News. The apostolate will not make any changes in their contribution to the universal Church, but the faith, which they have, and which they communicate will make difference in their apostolate. For consecrated persons, it is not a question of which kind of apostolate they are entrusted with; it can be the ministry of prayer, the ministry of life witness, the ministry of suffering and the ministry of service. The ministry should be inspired and motivated by the Holy Spirit. God's answer to the young virgin girl, the barren wife and to the elderly widow challenges each religious to take up the ministry entrusted to them as God's will, which is insignificant or significant; it does not make any difference because God calls to execute his divine plan.

The greatness of the Galilean women stems from the way that they made the decision to become disciples by watching the needs of others with sensitivity, by their constant companionship with Jesus and through their renunciation (Lk 8:3). These are typical feminine characteristics, which God has gifted in women's very nature. Through these characteristics, the women of Galilee served Jesus and followed him throughout his life. So the call of the Galilean women is interesting as well as challenging for the women religious. Female character is known for understanding, compassion and vulnerability. 'She' is deeply intuitive and intensely concerned with others. Women are possessed of great endurance and strength. The gentleness, the depth and of course love and nurturing these are of the feminine. 'She' is known for keen sensing and heightened capacity for devotion so 'she' can play a significant role in the spiritual evolution of mankind. All of these characteristics made the women followers of Jesus become noticeable persons in the ministry of Jesus. Thus, from their very nature as feminine, they served Jesus and followed him on his way to Jerusalem. This example of Galilean women invites each consecrated woman to renew her spiritual life as well as apostolate through all these feminine qualities. These qualities will help the religious women to respond to the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel, so that their life as religious women may be nourished and grow in quality.

From the beginning of the ministry of Jesus, the women were with him and were faithful to the call they received. It proves that the discipleship demands a strong personal attachment to Jesus. As a mark of true strong personal attachment, the Galilean women had left everything, their family, possessions, relations, etc. at the cost of following Jesus. It is significant to note that some of them were even married like Joanna who left their families and dear ones to follow Jesus and they faithfully remained until the end. The renunciation of everything is the basic principle in religious life and these Galilean women remain as wonderful models for the denial of possessions. The renunciation of possessions leads the consecrated persons to the knowledge of Christ. Thus, knowing Jesus becomes their deepest hope, greatest joy and dearest love in their personal relationship with Jesus. 1 Cor 2:9 reminds us, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him."

The different apostolates of the religious – in fighting illiteracy, injustice, sickness, poverty, misery and oppression – has led to the assertion that the consecrated persons are the signs beyond all signs. In fact, they are an indispensable evangelical sign among their people constituting in the heart of the Church an enormous resource through their readiness for service, presence and witness through which they continue to give an effective,

irreplaceable and unique contribution to the prophetic mission of the Church and to human promotion in their society.

The women at the tomb are the models of both, active and contemplative, dimensions of religious life. They remembered (*mimneskomaî*) the word of God, what they heard from Jesus during his earthly ministry. This remembrance of the word of God leads them to convictions. So the women at the tomb believed the fact of resurrection and again dedicated their life to the ministry of the Risen One. More than anything else, the love that inspires the women at the tomb to witness the message of the resurrection. The women at the empty tomb coped very well with extra ordinary situations – reception of divine revelation and bringing the message of this revelation to others. They knew how to listen and how to discern upon divine invitation. So the women at the empty tomb inspire women religious to re-discover their capacity to cope with mission entrusted to them and to believe and contemplate the Word of God spoken to them.

### **Conclusion**

The women in the Gospels are minor characters who do a little in the context of the Gospels to propel the plot forward. But they emerge in the Gospels as hidden heroines, following Jesus on his way to the cross, demonstrating courage, showing faith, offering service, in short, exemplifying the marks of true discipleship. The

passion narrative proves that the women were present at both Jesus' death and his resurrection. The followers of Jesus are expected to demonstrate their faith and commitment through their life. To effectively accomplish this witness mission, the women religious must retrieve the mystical dimension of their consecration, which is often rendered less visible by the desire *to do* rather than *to be*. Despite the many human needs of our people, the significance and importance of consecrated life today cannot be based on the numerous apostolates or works, no matter how essential they may be, but fundamentally on being women totally dedicated to God. This is the basis of the prophetic witness, which our Church and society seriously demand from women religious today.

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## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> George Soares Prabhu, "Rejoice Favoured One: Mary in the Annunciation Story of Luke," *BiBh* 3 (1999): 259-77, 269.

<sup>2</sup> Lucien Legrand, "The Visitation in Context," in *The Word is Near You: Collected Papers of Lucien Legrand* (vol. 1; eds. A. A. Xavier & M. D. S. Kumar; Bangalore: St Peter's Pontifical Institute, 2001), 373-96, 377.

<sup>3</sup> Max Turner, "Luke and the Spirit," in *Reading Luke* (ed. C. G. Bartholomew; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 267-93, 270; Robert P. Menzies, *Empowered for Witness: The Spirit in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1994), 108-109.

<sup>4</sup> Loveday Alexander, "Reading Luke-Acts from Back to Front," in *The Unity of Luke-Acts* (ed. J. Verheyden; BETL 142; Leuven: University Press, 1999), 419-46, 437.

<sup>5</sup> For other examples involving women note Lk 1:26-56; 2:36-38; 4:38-39; 7:11-17, 36-50; 8:40-48; 10:38-42; 11:27-28; 13:10-17; 23:27, 49, 55; 24:1-11. See, Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (SNTSMS Cambridge: University Press, 1988), 138-57; Ben Witherington III, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity* (Cambridge: University Press, 1990), 201-24.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Swidler, "Jesus in His Encounter with Women," *AER* 13 (1971): 290-301, 290. See also, Jennie R. Ebeli, "The Contribution of Archaeology to the Study of Women in Biblical Times," *R&E* 106 (2009): 383-98.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave* (vol. 2; New York: Doubleday Books, 1994), 1157-58.

<sup>8</sup> *Mathētēs* is the more technical term for discipleship. The term implied two things: to be with him and sent out by him in his mission. See for details, Rengstorf, "*mathētēs*," *TDNT* 4:414-461.

<sup>9</sup> Kittel, "*akoloutheō*," *TDNT* 1: 210-16, 210.

<sup>10</sup> Epictetus, *Discourses* (trans. W. A. Oldfather; LCL; 2 vols.; London: William Heinemann, 1959), 1:205-205.

<sup>11</sup> Blendinger, "*akoloutheō*," *NIDNTT* 1:480-83, 482.

<sup>12</sup> Some examples for the prompt obedience of the disciples from the Gospel of Mark: "and immediately they left their nets and they followed him" (Mk 1:8); "and they left their father Zebedee . . . and followed him" (Mk 1:20), "and he (Levi) rose and followed him" (Mk 2:14).

<sup>13</sup> Baby Parambi, *The Discipleship of the Women in the Gospel According to Matthew* (Rome: Gregorian University, 2003), 129.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Plevnik, "The Eleven and Those with Them according to Luke," *CBQ* 40 (1978): 205-11, 208.

<sup>15</sup> Leon L. Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 726.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke* (AB 28; Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1986), 826.

<sup>17</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 317.

<sup>18</sup> Luise Schottroff, "Women as Followers of Jesus in NT Times" in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics* (eds. Norman K. Gottwald and Richard A. Horsley; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 453-61. See also, Robert J. Karris, "Women and Discipleship in Luke," *CBQ* (1994): 1-20, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Susan Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 163.

- <sup>20</sup> Luke T. Johnson, *Luke* (ed. D. J. Harrington; SP; Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 131.
- <sup>21</sup> Legrand, "Women's Ministries in the NT," in *The Word is Near You: Collected Papers of Lucien Legrand* (vol.1; eds. A. Aloysius Xavier and M. D. S. Kumar; Bangalore: St. Peter's Pontifical Institute, 2001), 140-154, 142.
- <sup>22</sup> Prema Vakayil, "From Galilee to Jerusalem: The Women Discipleship in the Synoptic Gospels," in *Out of His Treasure Festschrift in Honour of Prof. Lucien Legrand* (eds. S. Savarimuthu, M. D. S. Kumar and J. Titus; Bangalore: ATC, 2010), 236-47, 241-42.
- <sup>23</sup> Parambi, *The Discipleship of the Women in the Gospel According to Matthew*, 131.
- <sup>24</sup> Carl Schneider, "Kathēmai," *TDNT* 3:440-444, 440.
- <sup>25</sup> Rick Strelan, "To Sit is to Mourn: The Women at the Tomb (Matthew 27:61)," *Colloquium* 31 (1999): 31-45.
- <sup>26</sup> Paul Gaechter, *Das Matthäus-Evangelium* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1962), 940; Walter Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (ThHNT 1; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1968), 568; Marie J. Lagrange, *Évangile selon saint Matthieu* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1948), 535; Bruce W. Porter, "With our Backs to the Grave: Ps 90:5; Mt 27:61; Lk 24:9," *PSB* 1 (1978): 232-35; Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew* (NAC 22; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 423.
- <sup>27</sup> Leopold Sabourin, *The Gospel according to St Matthew* (vol. 2; Bombay: St Paul Publications, 1983), 922; John P. Heil, "The Narrative Structure of Matthew 27:55-28:20," *JBL* 110 (1991):419-438, 427; Donald Senior, *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1985),13; David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 263; Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 727.
- <sup>28</sup> Christopher F. Evans, *Saint Luke* (TPINTC; London: SCM Press, 1990), 883.
- <sup>29</sup> For details, Virginia R. Sandiyagu, *The Galilean Women in the Redaction of Luke* (Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit, 2008), 327-337.
- <sup>30</sup> Sandiyagu, *The Galilean Women in the Redaction of Luke*, 437.
- <sup>31</sup> Witherington III, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity*, 120.
- <sup>32</sup> The opinion of Trites about the use of witness terminology and its development is noteworthy. The Johannine witness terminology (cf. Rev 2:13; 11:3; 17:16) developed over the course of five separate stages. In the first, martyr simply meant a witness in a court of law, without any expectation of death. In the second phase, which he connects most closely to the time in which John was writing, the word had come to indicate someone who testified to his faith in a law court and died because of it. In other words, here was a kind of prophetic figure, who went into court knowing that the words he would say might cost him his life. In the third phase, which Trites feels does evidence itself in its very earliest stages in John's time and writing, death is inextricably tied to witness.

Still, even at this point, death is not the primary component. That occurs only at the fourth stage, where a person's death is highlighted; then in the fifth stage the idea of witnessing disappears altogether, and a martyr becomes someone who dies for his or her faith. These latter two stages of meaning do not occur until the second century, well after John had finished his work. Allison A. Trites, "Martus and Martyrdom in the Apocalypse: A Semantic Study," *NovT* 15 (1973): 72-80, 75.

<sup>33</sup> Strathmann, "Martus," *TDNT* 4: 474-519, 489.

<sup>34</sup> Johannes Beutler, "Martus," *EDNT* 2: 393-95, 394.

<sup>35</sup> Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 1543; Asa B. Luter, "Women Disciples and the Great Commission," *TJ* (1995): 171-85, 182.

<sup>36</sup> Karris, "Women and Discipleship in Luke," 10.

<sup>37</sup> See, Evans, *Saint Luke*, 896; Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 1545.

<sup>38</sup> Pheme Perkins, *Resurrection: New Testament Witness and Contemporary Reflection* (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1984), 155.

<sup>39</sup> In the OT, the people are exhorted frequently to remember the words and deeds of God (Num 15:39-40; Deut 5:15; 7:18; 8:2, 18; 9:7; 15:15; 16:3, 12; 24:19, 20, 22; 32:7) so that they might come to new obedience and trust and the purity of faith. See, Otto Michel, "mimnēskomai," *TDNT* 4: 674-83, 676.

<sup>40</sup> Out of the twenty-three occurrences of the verb *mimnēskomai* in the NT, eight times it is found in Luke-Acts (Lk 1:54, 72; 16:25; 23:42; 24:6, 8; Acts 10:31; 11:16). Except in Lk 16:25, the verb *mimnēskomai* has religious significance in the writings of Luke. See, Michel, *TDNT* 4: 676-77.

<sup>41</sup> Julius Schniewind, "aggelia," *TDNT* 1: 64-66, 66.

<sup>42</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2001), 441.

<sup>43</sup> See, Stephen C. Barton, *Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew* (SNTSMS 80; Cambridge: University Press, 1995), 62.

<sup>44</sup> Dennis M. Sweetland, *Our Journey with Jesus: Discipleship according to Luke-Acts* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990), 279.

<sup>45</sup> Antonio Luis Tagle, "Mary, Truly a Woman of Our Times," in *Discipleship of Asian Women at the Service of Life* (vols. 2; ed. Virginia Saldanha; Bangalore: Claretian Pub., 2011), 221-28, 226.