

# Let Me Be Content One Day At A Time



*On January 8, 2024, we commemorate the 100th day since the Bishop of Penang's elevation to cardinal. In celebration, HERALD reconnects with the cardinal, engaging in an insightful conversation revisiting his appointment. Unaware of the grand designs that God had for him, Cardinal Sebastian Francis discovered that the Lord had been quietly orchestrating events, equipping him for his new role, and he embraced these developments with grace, accepting everything as part of God's plan.*

When a young Fr Sebastian Francis embraced Fiat Voluntas Tua (Thy will be done) for his priestly ordination on July 28, 1977, little did he envision that this vow would echo through his life in the years that followed. This commitment led to significant shifts, including leaving his home diocese of Malacca Johore, establishing new roots within the Diocese of Penang, and ultimately charting a course toward Rome.

On August 20, 2012, the then Msgr Sebastian Francis assumed the mantle as the fifth Bishop of the Diocese of Penang, reiterating Fiat Voluntas Tua as his episcopal motto, enriched with the verse 'A Shepherd I Pray I'll Be.'

Eleven years into his episcopate, contemplating retirement at the customary age of 75, the Lord unveiled yet another calling for this faithful steward. Thus, on September 30, 2023, Right Reverend Sebastian Francis,

Bishop of Penang, was elevated to the esteemed rank of Cardinal, bestowed upon him by Pope Francis at the consistory in Rome.





# Called to Continue the Mission

Unexpectedly appointed as a cardinal, I found myself at a juncture I hadn't foreseen. At 72, my sights were set on retiring at 75, the focus always on the mission's continuity rather than on titles. My immediate reaction? A contemplation on the potential loss of privacy and personal liberty.

This appointment, however, fosters a deep sense of connection with Pope Francis and the Universal Church, a bond that I cherish.

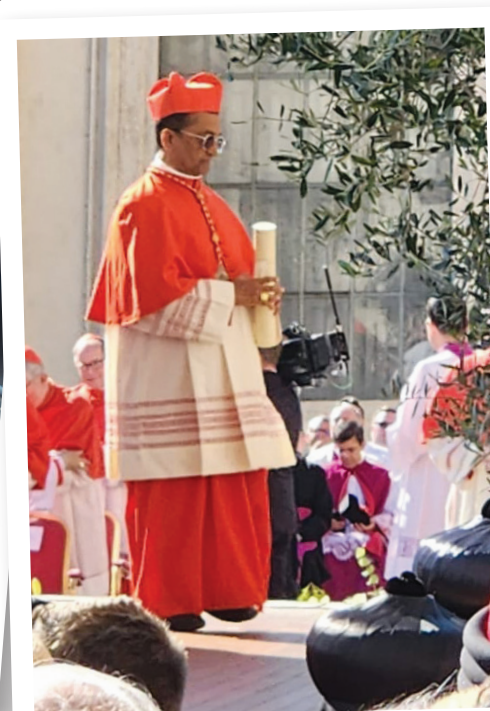
Recognising that I am not alone, I instinctively recalled the esteemed cardinals who came before me. I am humbled to follow in the path of the late Cardinal Soter Fernandez (Malaysia), the late Cardinal Cornelius Sim (Brunei), and now alongside Cardinal William Goh (Singapore). We all belong to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei.

Many have inquired, 'Have you ever pondered why the Holy Father selected you to join the ranks of his esteemed cardinals?' The straightforward truth is that I never dwelt on it. Speculation tends to fall into stereotypical patterns, which I find rather tiresome. Primarily, the choice rests with the Holy Father; he bears the greater responsibility in answering that question than I do. People are fixated on the 'Why.' Why was I appointed Bishop of Penang? Why was I entrusted with chairing the FABC Office of Social Communications? Why was I elevated to cardinal?



For me, the answer lies in the division of responsibilities and the seamless continuation of our shared mission. Embracing this call, this selection, is crucial for us to carry forward the mission. For example, I view my presence in the diocese of Penang as an extension of the legacy left by the late bishops Francis Chan, Gregory Yong, Soter Fernandez, and Bishop Emeritus Antony Selvanayagam. I prefer not to squander time contemplating why God singled me out. Instead, I simply acknowledge, 'Okay, I've been chosen,' and focus on advancing the mission.

Every bishop should be prepared, with sleeves rolled up, ready to answer the call — whether anticipated or not — to assist the Pope in governing the universal Church. In my role as a cardinal, I advocate for embracing the local phrase *turun padang*, signifying a commitment to engaging with and addressing the realities on the ground.





# Universality, Inculturation, Evangelisation



I felt deeply inspired reading the Holy Father's appointment letter to me. In it, Pope Francis stressed three fundamental principles: the "universality of the Church," the "inculturation of the faith," and the "evangelisation of cultures." These weren't just my takeaways; they were his clear directives to me.

Beginning with the idea of universality, the Pope's message was strikingly straightforward. He delved extensively into Pentecost, explicitly tying it to the concept of universality. He highlighted how Pentecost marked the birth of universality within the Church, broadening its focus from Judaism or Israel to encompass the entire universe. The Pope's emphasis on universality didn't imply uniformity — a hallmark of Francis. Instead, he emphasised that universality unfolded at Pentecost through a symphony of unity. He drew upon *Acts 2:9-11*, embracing diverse regions, even those entrenched in conflict, like Judea. Sadly, the world hasn't shifted much since then. Yet, the Pope underscored the Church's responsibility to convey a message that transcends sectarianism — a universal message relevant to all humanity.

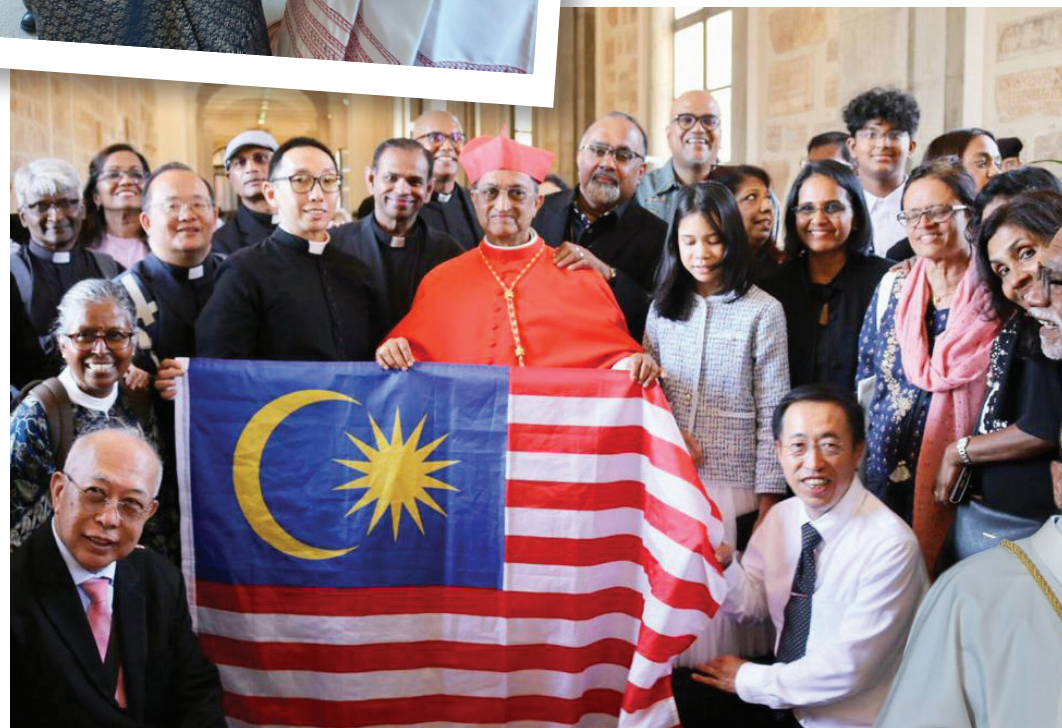
Furthermore, he urged me to embrace the idea of "inculturating the faith." While the faith itself is Catholic, the Pope stressed the importance of integrating it into diverse cultural landscapes worldwide — whether in Asia, Africa, the Americas, Latin America, Europe, Russia, or any other region where cultural roots need to intertwine with faith. He highlighted that not only should the faith adapt, but the cultures themselves should embody the Gospel's values.

It's crucial to recognise that while these directives might seem new to some, they're not a departure from the Church's long-standing mission. The Pope's emphasis on universality, inculturation, and the evangelisation of cultures is a continuation of the Church's enduring mission.

The groundwork for our path was laid long ago. Our Malaysian Church has been steering in this direction since Vatican II, notably culminating in our *Aggiornamento* of 1976. This journey isn't about a single individual's plans but rather, the collective dedication of many in integrating faith with culture.

I entered the priesthood after these pivotal moments. I see my role as building upon the solid foundations established by my predecessors, not as a solo act but as part of a legacy. It's essential to avoid a narrative centred on a single person; the real essence lies in the continuity of our mission. I appreciate the reinforcement, but it mirrors what the Malaysian Church has long been progressing towards, and indeed, the broader path that the Church in Asia has embraced.

The beauty of the Catholic Church lies in its continuum, not in individual identities, whether it's Pope Francis or me, Cardinal Sebastian, or any other person. I invite everyone to participate in this ongoing mission, a continuation that transcends personalities and spans generations.





# Duties Extend Beyond Local Obligations

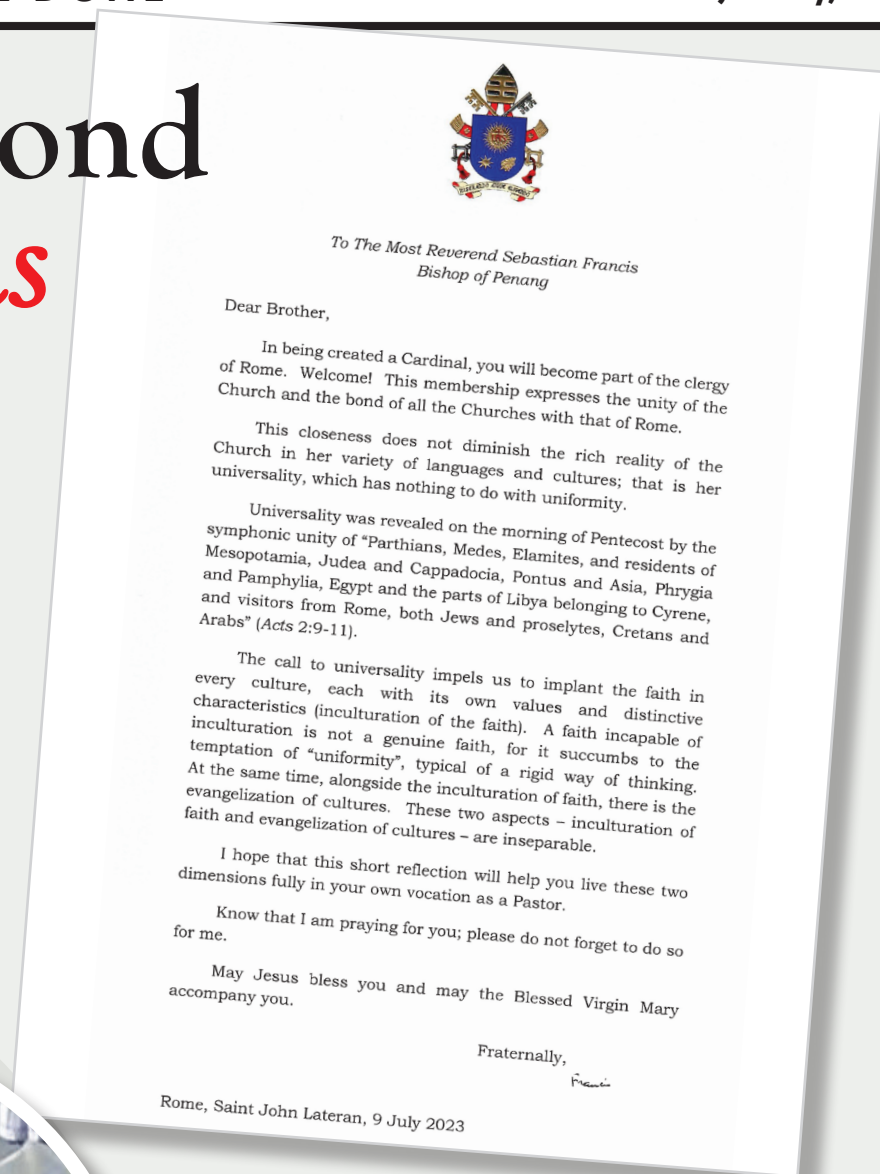
Pope Francis, in his letter to me dated July 9, 2023, appointed me to join the clergy of Rome. As a newly appointed cardinal, I was also entrusted with a church in Rome, specifically the Church of Our Lady, Cause of Our Joy, symbolising my connection to Pope Francis, the Bishop of Rome.

Symbolism holds significant weight in the Catholic tradition, and these symbols convey a profound narrative. Why assign me a church in Rome within the Diocese of Rome? Is it due to a lack of responsibilities in my current area, the Penang Diocese, which spans five states? No, it's a symbolic gesture indicating, "You're now part of the Diocese of Rome, under the leadership of Pope Francis. Embrace his ministry." This symbolic tie was emphasised by assigning me a particular parish in Rome, a choice that pleasantly surprised me given my strong belief in the virtue of joy.

The theme of joy resonates deeply, mirroring Pope Francis' commencement of his ministry with the encyclical *Gaudium et Spes* centred on the joy of the Gospel. When I received the Parish of Mary, Cause of Our Joy, I was astounded.

During the consistory, approximately 20 individuals from that parish, spanning various ages, eagerly awaited the announcement of their new cardinal. Their genuine excitement moved me deeply. Despite the language barrier, I greeted and kissed each one of them, fostering an immediate bond.

Subsequently, I visited the parish, touched by the warm reception of the parishioners. Though an official visit is planned for my next trip to Rome, this gesture signifies more than a mere formality. It underscores the Church's message to the cardinals: "Your duty extends beyond your local obligations in Penang; you're now integral to the Diocese of Rome under Pope Francis' guidance."



Neglecting to pray for and pastor these individuals would be neglecting my obligations. Thus, my responsibilities have expanded, encompassing them in my thoughts and prayers. In return, they pledged their reciprocal support. This symbolic transition serves as a reminder to integrate their concerns into my pastoral duties.

The name "Mary the Cause of Our Joy" speaks volumes. Upon meeting the parishioners, their palpable joy was infectious and inspiring. This joy serves as a testament to their faith and offers encouragement for my journey ahead.

## Admiration for Pope Francis

I was honoured to be appointed as the Bishop of the Diocese of Penang in 2012 by Pope Benedict XVI, continuing the sacred mission entrusted to St Peter, the Apostle, in solidarity with all past and present Popes. I deeply admire the interconnected triad of charisms presented by Pope Francis.

**The Joy of the Gospel:** Pope Francis articulates that joy transcends mere emotion; it is bestowed as grace and a gift by the Holy Spirit. This profound joy, a fruit of the Spirit, remains unattainable without His presence.

**The Mercy of God:** Pope Francis expounds on how Jesus exemplifies divine justice by saving sinners, emphasising that God's true justice is manifested through merciful salvation. As disciples of Jesus, we're called to empathise with one another, sharing burdens and practising compassion. Pope Francis dedicated 2016 as the Year of Mercy.

**Hope is a Gift from the Holy Spirit:** Pope Francis explained that hope transcends mere optimism for Christians; it embodies an enduring anticipation, bestowed as a divine gift by the Holy Spirit. It is a miraculous



force of rejuvenation, unfailingly sustaining us. Notably, Pope Francis has designated 2025 as the Jubilee Year of Hope.

The interconnection of these three charisms — Joy, Mercy, and Hope — constitutes the divine message conveyed by the Holy Spirit through our Holy Father.

Observing the current state of our world, I find it profoundly fitting that in 2025, we dedicate our prayers to hope — for refugees, migrants, victims of human trafficking, civilians enduring conflict zones, and all those grappling with distress. Indeed, Christ is Hope!



# The Cardinal's thoughts on...

## 1 Managing new responsibilities

I believe it's crucial to shift our perspective away from mere numbers, sheer magnitude, or volume, and focus more on intensity and the depth of connections. Instead of micromanaging every aspect, embracing a more inclusive approach is key.

There's a way to expand the circle, as they mention in discussions like the Synod nowadays. It involves delegation, inclusivity, and creativity. It's not just about the quantity; it's about fostering communion, spirituality, and effective governance with a multitude of willing individuals dedicated to this mission.

In my journey, I've been fortunate to have had substantial support from various groups, ranging from Rome to local conferences, including numerous individuals contributing to the cause. Neglecting core aspects like the Ministry of the Word and prayer, as highlighted by St Peter, can be a pitfall. Hence, I remind myself and those I work with about the significance of dedicating time to these crucial elements.

My approach doesn't involve asking for volunteers or handpicking individuals. Instead, I observe the unique talents and gifts (charisms) that individuals possess and then invite them into service. Surprisingly, I've found that most people don't decline the opportunity. It's not out of fear, but rather because they feel genuinely called, whether it's by the Lord through me or by the Church through my guidance. Empowering these individuals with not just responsibilities but also authority and power has been my strategy. I've come to realise that there are numerous capable individuals — laypeople, religious, and priests — waiting for a call, waiting to be chosen and entrusted.

This approach has made my experience in leadership an exciting and fulfilling journey. Despite the increasing workload, I don't feel burdened. If anything, I see it as a challenge to maintain joy and enthusiasm. If I were to lose that sense of joy and passion, I would consider it a sign to step down from my role. Ultimately, it's about sharing responsibilities, investing authority, and discovering that there are plenty of capable individuals eager to contribute to the mission of the Church.

## 2 Relaxation

I must admit, I'm not naturally inclined towards strict organisation; I tend to embrace spontaneity. Over my 45 years as a cleric, coupled with a 10-year formative period, I've learned to prioritise moments of tranquility above all. Whether it's morning, evening, or night, I hold sacred my personal, solitary time, devoid of any audience or external distractions. Exercise also holds a significant place in my routine. When bedtime arrives, I shut off all technology. Even if significant events occur, their immediacy doesn't outweigh the sanctity of that peaceful time.



It's vital to consider the body, soul, and spirit as an integrated whole, not as separate entities. Dividing and compartmentalising these aspects will inevitably lead to illness sooner rather than later. Therefore, tending to the synergy of body, soul, and spirit is imperative for fulfilling one's mission and finding fulfillment.

The Church's essence lies in the continuation of its mission — a mission entrusted primarily to the Holy Spirit, and subsequently to Pope Francis, myself, and all of us. Hence, I urge everyone to join the triumphant team: Team Holy Spirit. Its continuity and fulfillment are assured by the Spirit. So, why stress? Let's savour life a little and embrace relaxation. It took me many years to grasp this, but now I don't compromise.

## 3 The role of women in the Catholic Church

Drawing from St Paul's powerful words in his letter to the *Galatians* (3:28) — "When one is cloaked in Christ, there is no distinction between Jew or Greek, slave or free, male nor female: for all are one in Christ Jesus" — we recognise that in the embrace of Christ, distinctions of race, social status, and gender fade away, uniting us all in a shared identity in Christ Jesus.

The pivotal verse echoes the fundamental stance on women's role within the Church. It's crucial to emphasise that the place of women is not merely a concession but a natural and divine right. From the inception of Gospel proclamation, women have stood as Disciples and integral members of the People of God. This understanding roots us in the essentials; women actively engage in the mission of salvation. They partake in spreading the Gospel, nurturing, and aiding the marginalised in society — the poor, the needy, and the sick.

Today, women are awakening to a deeper awareness of their purpose within the Church, discovering their identities, and wholeheartedly contributing their unique 'gifts'. At the World Youth Day in Lisbon in 2023, Pope Francis acknowledged the invaluable contributions women offer: wisdom, care, nurturing communal living, and tending to the spiritual well-being of all.

In Malaysia, the clergy, religious communities, and the faithful must build upon the principles of *Aggiornamento* 1976. With discernment, we laid the foundations for Christ-centred communities or Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC) groups.

Four essential areas beckon our attention: fostering unity among the clergy, religious, and laity; prioritising formation; engaging in dialogue with cultures and religions; and advancing the holistic development of the impoverished.

In Malaysia, women have consistently held pivotal roles. They actively participate in ministry work, dedicating themselves to service, volunteering, and passionately contributing to evangelisation endeavours.





#### 4 ***Fratelli Tutti* and a love that transcends barriers**

On October 4, 2020, during the feast of St Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis unveiled *Fratelli Tutti*, an encyclical letter addressing fraternity and social friendship for Catholics and people of goodwill. In Italian, *Fratelli Tutti* translates to ‘all brothers and sisters.’ It draws inspiration from St Francis of Assisi’s guidance:

*“Call for a love that transcends the barriers of geography and distance and declares blessed all those who love their brother as much when he is far away from him as when he is with him”.*

*Fratelli Tutti* charts a path toward a more equitable, just, and peaceful society. It calls for unity among individuals of diverse faiths like Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and others, envisioning a collective society where humanity stands as one community, brothers and sisters in spirit.

Our response to *Fratelli Tutti* begins with prayers for unity and mutual respect. It implores us to construct bridges fostering friendship and comprehension between different communities. In the Diocese of Penang, active efforts have been made to forge strong bonds with our Muslim brethren and other faith groups.

Personally engaging with various spiritual leaders, I’ve witnessed a shared commitment to the ideals of fraternity and humanity. Discussions often centre around embracing all humans, uniting them under a single banner of humanity. It’s imperative for fellow Malaysians to seek common ground rooted in our shared humanity, paving the way for peace and harmony in our diverse, multicultural nation.



I often reference Pope Francis’ *Fratelli Tutti* during interfaith dialogues. Compassion, a cherished attribute in Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other faiths, should guide our actions, particularly in aiding the less fortunate — the poor, orphaned, sick, and homeless.

In interfaith gatherings, with our Muslim brethren, we always share with our guests a copy of the ‘Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together’ – the Abu Dhabi Declaration, which was signed by both His Holiness Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmad Al -Tayyeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar on Feb 4, 2019.

The book extols that Catholics and Muslims and all who believe in God must work together to build a culture of love, peace and fraternity. In the name of human fraternity, dialogue must be adopted as the way, common cooperation as conduct and mutual knowledge as method and standard.

This book is always an icebreaker and once the guests see pictures of Pope Francis and Sheikh Al-Tayeb hugging and sitting together, it always evokes smiles and cordiality among all present.



## 5 Embracing discipleship

We are united in the Mission of Christ and dedicated to serving for Christ's cause. The foremost priority is discipleship, rather than assigning hierarchical roles. It's crucial to undergo a paradigm shift, a transformative conversion.

The bishops, as the successors of the Apostles, bear the responsibility of upholding truth and perpetuating the mission. Following them are the disciples encompassing the clergy, religious, and laity. Lastly, we have the entire People of God.

At times, an identity crisis may arise, but it's imperative for all of us to seek guidance from the Holy Spirit and rediscover our roles as clergy, religious, and laity, rooted in the essence of discipleship.

## 6 Ministry, outreach, and stewardship

As members of the Church, we bear distinct roles in fulfilling the mission of proclaiming the Gospel.

I consistently advocate for parents' vital ministry in nurturing their children's faith. I am heartened by parishioners actively engaged in serving Church communities and the broader society, as well as Catholics generously offering their time, financial support, prayers, and personal services. Each individual is a steward entrusted with the Church's mission.

Recognising that ultimately everything belongs to God, we must remain vigilant, discerning, and attuned to the guidance of the Holy Spirit to exercise sound judgment in our actions.



## 7 Seeking the lost sheep

Individuals come to church and leave due to choices made and conflicts arising from personal issues or disagreements with certain personalities. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights emphasises the essential freedoms, including freedom of conscience and religion. As a Church, we uphold these rights while being committed to the paramount mission of saving souls.

Pope Francis notably highlighted the Church's most crucial need today: the capacity to heal wounds and ignite the faithful's hearts. He likened the Church to a field hospital after a battle, emphasising the imperative of closeness, empathy, and outreach.

In his homily for the Opening of the XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (October 4, 2015), Pope Francis stated that the Church's mission is to approach its duty in charity, not condemning others but, true to its maternal nature, actively seeking out and caring for troubled individuals through acceptance and mercy. It should serve as a 'field hospital,' welcoming all who seek aid and support, and extending genuine love to accompany and guide those who suffer, leading them toward the source of salvation.

Our responsibility then, is to actively engage and revive faith in others. We must stand alongside them through prayer, sacrifice, and genuine companionship.





## 8 Hope amidst challenges

There has been a global rise in the persecution of Christians, marked by new forms of suffering rooted in racial, ideological, and belief-based dominations. In these challenging times, the Church is called to take a leading role in confronting these dangers.

Despite these adversities, hope remains the cornerstone the Church must uphold and radiate. A poignant example is the ruins of the Chapel of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary on Pulau Jerejak, Penang. Erected in 1896 by the Paris Foreign Missions Society (MEP) Fathers, it initially served patients at the Leper Asylum/Leprosarium and later accommodated migrants from India and China in the Quarantine Station, shielding Malaya from diseases like tuberculosis and leprosy.

These missionary priests courageously confronted the perils of diseases rather than fleeing, offering hope to the afflicted. Their selfless dedication stands as a testament to the Church's enduring mission to illuminate hope even in the darkest of times.

## 9 The Asian Church

The Church carries a powerful message—an embodiment of joy, mercy, and hope. It's a universal narrative that transcends boundaries. Our approach to evangelising in Asia is rooted in storytelling; it's ingrained in our culture. We hold a profound tale—the story of Jesus—and nothing will hinder us from sharing it. No political force or national barrier can permanently silence it; it always resurfaces. Our sole mission is to tell this story, as highlighted in the Asian Mission Congress in 2006, where we championed the idea of sharing Jesus' story as Asians—this is inculturation for us.

Our methods vary; for instance, in Mongolia, they “whisper the Gospel to one another.” This signifies intimacy, friendship, and companionship on a journey. Whispering is not for the masses; it's for individuals. This subtle approach mirrors our way of sharing the Gospel.

Everywhere, the Church sows seeds of faith. Its presence knows no bounds. Troubled areas, whether Afghanistan, Pakistan, Myanmar, or even in jungles or prisons, won't deter us. Wherever there's strife or disease outbreak, the Church stands steadfast, offering hope and aid. This, indeed, is the good news.

Our Asian Church embodies martyrdom. From China to Korea, Japan to Vietnam, and beyond, countless martyrs have paved the way for our journey. Their blood fuels the Church's progress, not our debates, philosophies, or idle chatter—truly, time wasted.

Now, I find myself a bit more at ease, recognising that the Church's essence lies not in empty discussions but in the resilience of its martyrs—a poignant reminder of our calling.

## 10 Being led by the Holy Spirit

During our Peninsular Malaysia Pastoral Convention at MAJODI back in 2016, Archbishop Julian Leow, Bishop Bernard Paul and I listened intently to the voices of the 800 participants. From that gathering



emerged a succinct yet profound statement—the Holy Spirit desires a Church in Semenanjung Malaysia that embodies inclusivity, creativity, and bridge-building. This isn't about an inward focus; it's about projecting these values outward.

Back in 2016, we articulated this aspiration, and today, the Synod, seven years later, reiterates the same message. The Holy Spirit maintains consistency in its call. Whether I align or not, the Holy Spirit will progress, urging me to join its forward movement.

While there are innumerable issues within the clergy, religious circles, and internal church dynamics—and likely more to come—let's not lose sight of the grander vision and mission. The Synod symbolises this with the phrase “Enlarge the space of your tent.” If we confine ourselves within narrow confines, we risk suffocation, loneliness, or fragmentation. The Holy Spirit urges us to expand, even though the prospect of inclusivity, creativity, and bridge-building might evoke fear.

Discussing inclusivity can be daunting, evoking fear in many. Similarly, embracing creativity and becoming bridge-builders can seem overwhelming. Retreating into our confined worlds might feel simpler. Yet, the Malaysian Church remains faithful to the call endorsed by the people and the Holy Spirit. As I've conveyed to Pope Francis and reiterate to all of you—the Holy Spirit will never forsake the Church. I might falter, but the Holy Spirit, unwavering, will guide the Church to its destiny. I assure us all of this. Let us all collaborate with the Holy Spirit. Amen.

