

Change in Mission and the Mission of Change

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Introduction. If the truth be told, I am writing this article with a bit of trepidation on the one hand and with a smile of unbelief on the other. Why? It was only last year that I was the one requesting articles for our newsletter; yet now, I am the one being tasked to submit one. What is more, I am also being asked to submit on or before the deadline. Time has indeed changed. Talk about the tables being turned on me. But, I am pretty sure, the turning of tables is not the policy of mission. Nonetheless, change has indeed come. It has also come in me, in a fashion that God has unfathomably permitted.

I want to zero in on my reflection about the phenomenon of change in our times. What change or changes do we experience in our contemporary world? Have we become just mere passive spectators of change? Or, do we actually push an agenda to effect change in the lives of our people? This is significant, since this will determine the current terrain of our mission. Otherwise, we will just be empty gongs and clanging cymbals without knowing our flock first. After all, this is the clear-cut directive of *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (10): “Priests should not be sent singly to a new field of labor, especially to one where they are not completely familiar.”

Moreover, on the part of mission, what change must be taken into consideration for enhancement of disposition and for pastoral strategies. A paradigm shift is a call to action. It is a serious sin for the Church to remain stagnant: *ecclesia semper reformanda est*. It is even a graver sin when Church people, missionaries at that, are not open to change. To transform one’s self is foremost. Pope Francis has strongly warned thus that for the Church to be missionary it must be “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” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 27).

In this year 2018, the challenge and inspiration of mission is made significant by the celebration of a year-long reflection on the life of the clergy and the religious as part of the nine-year preparation program for the fifth centennial blossoming of faith in the Philippines. Its theme is apt and timely: “Renewed Servant-Leaders for New Evangelization.” In many ways, it bespeaks of change as renewal. Also, it underlines transformation. No doubt, the CBCP must have been truly spirit-filled in coming up with this particular theme.

I. “Change in Person”: From Mission Director to Missionary Bishop. From my personal



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circumstance, I feel both blessed and challenged, privileged at the same time accountable. Why? By virtue of my ordination I am an ordained priest; concomitantly I have my affiliation to the Mission Society of the Philippines (MSP) which necessarily ordained me as well as a missionary. Which comes first is non-issue. Priests or consecrated persons in general are necessarily missionaries (*Ad Gentes* 39). Moreover, my present pastoral assignment as local ordinary in Palawan makes my circumstance as *sui generis* of sort, modesty aside. This is ascribable to the fact that the ecclesiastical territory of Puerto Princesa is still a mission territory by virtue of its being an apostolic vicariate. Accordingly, that makes me a missionary bishop unquestionably. *Redemptoris Missio* reminds me now that “all priests must have the mind and the heart of missionaries” (RM 67).

The Aristotelian-Thomistic axiom *agere sequitur esse* befits my person vis-a-vis my action and my vocation towards my mission. Conceivably, this is nothing less than the beauty and the challenge as well of integrity, both personal integrity and missionary integrity. Both dimensions of integrity encapsulate well the virtue of spirituality. “Like Jesus Christ, the person of the missionary is an instrument of the epiphany of God in the manner of doing mission, simultaneously as it inflames or animates his life and person in all his mission activities.... It is the manifestation of the activity of God in the life of the missionary disciple” (Saniel, *Missionary Spirituality*, 2016).

On the other hand, the reverse could also be said to be true and valid in one’s missionary

disposition: action affects our person. It is simply unthinkable that one remains unchanged before (and after) real experiences and human situations. A genuine missionary-disciple cannot be indifferent, much less a stranger, to peoples and events. We must get our hands dirty to include the excluded, says Pope Francis. When hands are already dirtied, we are not the same again. Missionaries are molded by the very lives of the flock. A shepherd, too, is formed by his sheep. A healer is shaped by wounds.

My stint as Director of the Pontifical Mission Societies (PMS) has allowed me to see, albeit from a general view, situations and challenges of the mission territories. The experiences brought about by my immediate former pastoral office have effected in me a genuine understanding and deep appreciation of mission. I should say that I am never the same again as a consecrated person, as a missionary-priest.

Now that the Lord has called me to another mission as His consecrated bishop, I pray not only for my integrity, but also for my perseverance as a man of mission, a man for mission. Help me to “get my hands dirty” along with the sheepfold of the vicariate. Assist me to become a witness of God’s enduring care for his flock. And, as I have always mentioned, I only bring myself to this new mission—my MSP identity, my *Boholano* religiosity, my experiences in the various fields of mission, among others.

II. “Change in Mission”: Context and Challenges of Mission in Palawan. My particular mission in PMS was sort of a lighthouse ministry

to me. It has permitted me to look over the horizons of mission in the Philippines. I was able to visit mission territories, share mission through lectures, talks and the like, administer the temporal goods of the Church, ensure open and enriching relationships and linkages with other similar offices in other countries and in Rome. It was like a telescopic view from where I was doing mission.

My unexpected appointment as bishop and the eventual ordination and installation as shepherd of the Apostolic Vicariate of Puerto Princesa (AVPP) brought about significant change in my person and mission, to say the least. The lighthouse ministry has turned into "rowing-the-boat-by-myself" ministry. From looking at several boats from the lighthouse, the episcopal ministry demands from me now to paddle my own canoe in company and in collaboration with the people of Palawan. The radical transition from the lighthouse to the rudder of the boat speaks volumes of changes in terms of my own mission. I will be able to actualize my experience and knowledge as a missionary. Humbly, I should say that I am first and foremost a missionary who happens to be wearing the hat of a bishop. Palawan (the AVPP) is now the *locus* and the *focus* of my missionary activities.

The relatively short span of time during which I have done visitations to parishes and

consultations with the clergy and the lay faithful has already given me a feel and a sense of the pastoral challenges of the Vicariate. Without a doubt, our local Church is every inch a mission territory. The topography, resources, personnel, and the like do present a clear portrait of a "Church-in-need." In a nutshell, I can describe my mission in AVPP:

>>> The day after my ordination and installation, my *buena mano* sort of pastoral care came on the feast day of Our Lady of Lourdes, the World Day of the Sick. At dawn I traveled to Ipilan, Brooke's Point (190 kilometers drive from the city) to preside over Holy Mass and Confirmation and to celebrate the parish fiesta. Conspicuously, this distance of this particular parish from the city is not yet halfway to the farthest parish that I must attend to as local ordinary.

>>> Months later, I landed in the news on account of my stand on environmental protection and care for the integrity of creation. As a Church, we expressed disappointment over the cutting of more than 15,000 trees in Palawan by a mining company, which did not have the necessary permits from the local government. Our place, which is considered as the Philippines' "last frontier" and very rich in natural resources must be preserved. It goes without saying that *Laudato Sí* is a call to action and must shine brightly in this part for the protection of creation.



>>> The life and situation of our clergy bespeak too of the challenges and the ordeal of mission in the vicariate. Some activities and realities are worth mentioning: (1) Due to the demographic terrain, including the unavailability of resources, our clergy get to meet only four times in a year, courtesy of our quarterly assembly. (2) I was somewhat jolted when we had to celebrate our Chrism Mass for the renewal of priestly vows more than one month (March 9) before Holy Thursday (April 13) which is the proper day of the said liturgical ceremony. (3) It is not uncommon that on a Sunday our priests could preside over several Masses. Without getting into a much detailed depiction, I have asked them to limit their Sunday celebrations to five Masses as maximum. (4) Currently, there is no clergy house nor retirement-hospital plan for our sick and elderly priests. (5) Finally, I am also alarmed at the dearth of vocations to the priesthood. All these and more, give us a picture of the mission of priests and the religious in Palawan.

>>> Lastly, but in no way of least importance, is the unfortunate reality of poverty in our mission land. According to a survey, Palawan has the highest poverty incidence in MIMAROPA Region. This is unfortunate as it is alarming, since Palawan is known for its immense natural wealth and distinctive ecological beauty.

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In view of the teachings of *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (10) that “every priest must be ready and willing to be sent in mission ‘even to the ends of the earth’” and that of *Redemptoris Missio* (67) that “every priest shares in the universal mission ... and that the true Catholic spirit whereby they will learn to transcend the bounds of their own diocese, country or rite, and come to the aid of the whole Church,” the missionary milieu of Palawan can indeed be a testament and a fulfillment for every priest and consecrated person to be inspired and courageous enough to work in this side of the world and in this kind of vineyard of the Lord.

III. “Mission of Change”: Pastoral Initiatives in Palawan. Last Saturday (October 28, Feast of Saints Simon and Jude) marked one year since my public announcement as bishop of the AVPP. This considerable and ample time allows me do pastoral visits and travel up to the farthest barrio of our vicariate. Like a young father who is just starting to build a family, I also have a sort of a “to-do list” for the sheepfold that the Lord has entrusted to me. With due indulgence, allow me to narrate my vision:

>>> *A Vibrant Church.* Referencing our Holy Father, Pope Francis, I aspire for a Church that will become relevant to the life of the people, a people who are involved in the life and mission of the Church. I hope that we, as one people, will recapture the missionary energy of the Church in Palawan, especially that the culture of the land is rapidly becoming globalized, courtesy of a booming





tourism industry and burning ecological issues, not to mention the usual problems of local politics.

>>> *Special Focus on the Youth.* Without relegating to the sidelines those who are “non-youth,” I set special sight and care for the youth and the children. There must be a “holy anxiety” on the part of the Church, especially Church leaders, on account of the phenomenon in other countries where the Church has already lost a grip on young people. Unfortunately, some may have been drifting away towards the altar of secularism. We need to counter this influence by intensifying our efforts to reach out to the youth, the unchurched, and those in the peripheries.

>>> *Concern for the Clergy.* While every priest shares in the priesthood of the bishop, it goes without saying that every bishop is first of all father to his priests. I have seen and have observed how our priests dedicate themselves to the difficult mode shepherding, braving waves and mountains just to reach a barrio chapel. I propose then to my collaborator-priests the following: a hospitalization and retirement plan, construction of their retirement house (priests have nowhere to go when they retire, having left behind family when they decided to enter priesthood), on-going formation and enhancement of learning, formation of future-priests, among others.

>>> *Administrative Shepherding.* I adhere to the fundamental principle in administration

that competition in the organism must be avoided. Instead, every effort is always towards a synergy by aligning directions according to an overall pastoral plan. Charisms, talents, strategies and treasures must all lead towards a growth and enrichment of the Church.

Needless to say, this dream is actually nothing if we do not allow the Lord to actually build it. In vain will we labor without the Lord. Further, the pastoral vision is geared towards the administration of serving the salvation of souls. Otherwise, it will be vain and imprudent.

Conclusion. We are now more than halfway in our journey towards the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Christianity in our country. Our God has been gracious. Time has proven significantly challenging as it is rapidly changing. We look at the future with so much hope, relying on God’s countenance gazing upon us. We entrust to Him our person, our mission and our vision. May this year, dedicated to the preeminent collaborators of mission—the religious and consecrated persons—be Pentecost-like in its meaning and fruition. *FIDES et FORTITUDO!*

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