

EUCHARIST AND MERCIFUL DEEDS

Pillars of Authentic Mission

The Philippines has been privileged to have hosted two International Eucharistic Congresses (IEC): the twenty-third (Manila: February 3-7, 1937) and the fifty-first (Cebu: January 24-31, 2016). Many parallels between these two congresses can be drawn; however, in the basic vision and orientation of both events, one pivotal theme constantly appears: *Eucharist and Mission*. The great theme of the IEC in Cebu was: “*Christ in You, the Hope of Glory: The Eucharist, Source and Goal of Mission*,” a theme inspired by the Letter of Saint Paul to the Colossians (1:24-29).

The “Basic Text” of the Cebu Congress asserts: “This international gathering holds the promise of generating a more courageous and decisive carrying out of the Christian mission in the world and the society that are becoming more and more indifferent and hostile to the faith and to the values of the Gospel. This encounter with Christ in the Eucharist can be a source of hope for the world when, transformed through the power of the Holy Spirit into the likeness of Him whom we encounter, we set out on a mission to transform the world with our zeal to bring to those who need most the same acceptance, forgiveness, healing, love, and wholeness that we ourselves received and experienced.”

In addition, the Cebu IEC has important “mission significance” for the Philippines, particularly in the context of “the joyous and historic observance of the 500th anniversary in 2021 of the coming of the Christian Faith and of the Christian Church to the country.” Quoting some Congress speakers, this presentation now highlights some “Eucharist-Mission” dimensions.

EUCHARIST: SACRAMENT OF MISSION

Cardinal Charles Maung Bo from Myanmar was the papal legate for the IEC 2016. His message and homily at the opening Mass on January 24, 2016 focused on the theme: “Moving from Eucharistic Celebration to Eucharistic Commitment.” Some of his insights are: “We are gathered on a global stage, a global table, for a cosmic Eucharist: Eucharist as a Mission in Cebu.... After 79 years of a Eucharistic Congress [1937-2016] in this great land of faith, you have come forward to celebrate this global fellowship.... You have proved your resilience, your faith, rising from all challenges. May this 51st IEC be the moment of healing the earth, the wounded planet, and healing the graceful people of this country and everyone gathered here.”

Cardinal Bo asserted: “a short sentence changed history. They are the words: ‘Take and eat, this is my body; take and drink, this is my blood.’ Yes, the most powerful words in human history, the most powerful words in the dialogue of God with man.... The Eucharist is a spiritual jewel.... The Eucharist and adoration is an intense faith encounter with Jesus.... It was Mother Teresa who contemplated this mystery of Presence. She says every Holy Communion fills us with Jesus and we must go in haste to give him to others” [imitating Mary going to visit Elizabeth].

“Adoration alone may make us good devotees, but being a devotee is one of the easiest things.... Christ is calling us to be disciples, to carry his cross. The Mass of the devotee ends in an hour, but the Mass of the disciple is unending. The Eucharist of the devotee is confined to the clean,

decorated altars of the church; the Eucharist of the disciples continues with the streets as altar.... Personal encounter with the Lord occurs in the Eucharist; and, this is precisely the personal encounter with the Lord that strengthens the mission contained in the Eucharist. Yes, Eucharist leads us to mission.... [May this congress] make us move *from Eucharistic Celebration to Eucharistic Commitment in promoting the Eucharist as Mission*, the Eucharist as the bread of justice to the poor, the Eucharist as the bread of peace in conflict areas.”

Cardinal Luis Antonio “Chito” Tagle explored the question: “Why does the Church engage in dialogue with cultures?” For him, the simple answer is: *to serve mission*. Following upon a lengthy analysis of contemporary cultures, Tagle continued: “Let me turn to the Eucharist. The Eucharist offers an experience of another culture, the culture of convocation, ‘*convocare*,’ you are called with others. You are called to be with others, and you are called to be with others in a meal that the Lord hosts. When the Lord hosts a meal, be prepared to be with surprising others. But, in the meal hosted by the Lord, persons recognize a close neighbor, a fellow sinner, a sister, a brother, with a place at the family table. In each one, I see myself, as I see a brother or sister. I also discover myself: sinful but loved; undeserving but invited; shamed but embraced; lost but trusted. This is how Jesus hosted and participated in meals by calling together the most unimaginable combination of people to a community to become his family, his Body....”

“My dear brothers and sisters, let us begin the dialogue with the culture of alienating individualism in our homes. Restore the family meals. The basic unit of the meal is the table, the common table. Nowadays, the basic unit of the meal is my plate. And, if I have my plate with food on it, I can go anywhere and eat by myself; but, that is not a meal, that is just eating. Individualistic persons know how to eat, but they don’t know how to participate in a meal. May I ask ourselves here: are our sacraments and pastoral services accessible to the poor? Are our parishes welcoming to the deaf and other people with disabilities? Do the wounded, lost, shamed, humiliated, and despised find a family in our communities?”

“Let us behold Jesus in the Eucharist, let us allow him to form in us a community of neighbors, brothers and sisters; no more barriers, only bridges. Let us allow him to open our eyes, to see in creation, in persons, in the poor, the discarded, but truly gift of God; no one thrown away, only gifts to be treasured. This culture of communion and gift shared will make a Eucharistic community, a real, credible presence of Christ in the cultures of the world.”

Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil, SDB, Archbishop Emeritus of Guwahati, India, spoke on the topic: “The Eucharist as Mission: Mission as Dialogue,” emphasizing that in diverse ways, the Eucharist is an invitation to communion among peoples; the Eucharist makes the Church. The “communion of believers” that the Eucharist creates is for mission. “During this Eucharistic Congress we would like to respond, “Stay with us, Lord,” as the disciples of Emmaus did (Lk 24:29), especially as we feel the challenges of a changing world press hard upon us and the vision of Faith grows dim all around us. His presence makes a difference; it provides the light we need and supplies the strength we lack.”

“Saint Ephraem has a powerful image in this connection. He says that the one who eats this bread, eats *fire* and clothes himself with *fire*. The disciples of Emmaus felt as though *fire* was burning in their hearts when they heard Jesus explain the Scriptures to them. No wonder they set

out on their return journey the very same night, with a sturdy sense of Mission, after they had broken bread with him (Lk 24:32-33).”

“‘My life is the continuation of my Mass,’ Blessed Alberto Hurtado used to say. Yes, the Eucharist overflows into life in the form of generosity, kindness, forgiveness, sincerity, and persevering work. It adds a quality to our decisions at home, in the kitchen, in the bedroom, in places of business and entertainment; in hospitals when the elimination of an unborn child is being contemplated, in the streets where human dignity is dragged to dust.... It is often during silent moments before the Eucharist that a believer hears the cry of the poor, a cry that rises to the heavens (James 5:4). It is here that he/she finds energies to sustain a worthwhile struggle.”

Cardinal Gaudencio Rosales, Archbishop Emeritus of Manila, was the main celebrant of the Eucharist on January 26, the third day of IEC 2016. During his homily Rosales reminded the participants that the Eucharist is “more than symbolic, it is the reality”; truly, it is “not just a task, but a mission.” Christ’s mandate to ‘Do this in memory of me’ goes beyond repeating Christ’s last meal on earth.... ‘Do this in memory of me’ means that as often as one eats the Body of Christ, he or she announces to others the power of the faith of our Lord Jesus.”

Rosales challenged the IEC participants: “Do the Eucharist. Live the Eucharist. Release the Eucharist from mere celebration! And, allow the Body and Blood of Jesus in you to roam the streets and byways, in jeepneys, tricycles and busses, stores and cafés, offices and schools, in every dining table, in homes where families engage in dialogue. It [such witnessing of Eucharistic faith] could change the world!”

Ite, Missa Est! Every Eucharist concludes with a “sending forth” of the assembly. As noted in the “Basic Text” for IEC 2016, this mission-sending character of the dismissal rite is related to the fact that both the words “Mass” and “mission” are derived from the Latin verb *mittere* (= to send). It is also significant that this rite is described as one that missions the people “to go out and do good works, praising and blessing God.”

“The celebration of the Eucharist, and every part of it, shows that the missionary responsibility of the Church is instilled in her nature. Being a community-in-mission is part of her identity.” One may slightly modify the classical adage about the mutual generativity of the Eucharist and the Church: *The Missionary Church makes the Eucharist, and the Eucharist makes the Missionary Church!*

WORKS OF MERCY: OUR MISSION

Pope Francis continually insists that mercy is the very essence of God; he expresses it this way: “Jesus said that he came not for those who were good, but for the sinners. He did not come for the healthy, who do not need the doctor, but for the sick. For this reason, we can say that **mercy is God’s identity card**, God of Mercy, merciful God. For me, this really is the Lord’s identity.” This quote is from *The Name of God is Mercy*, released in 2016 in 86 countries in about 20 languages; it was Francis’ first book after his election to the papacy on March 13, 2013.

Undoubtedly, Pope Francis is the “pope of mercy.” Filipinos personally experienced this during his January 2015 Philippine visit, centered on the theme: *mercy and compassion*. A vast amount of Francis “mercy material” is available; probably the best source (readily found on the internet) is Francis’ document, *Misericordiae Vultus* [MV] (*The Face of Mercy*). Francis asserts: “We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace.... Mercy [is] the bridge that connects God and man” (MV 2).

Pope Francis calls Christians to a renewed practice of the *corporal and spiritual works of mercy* (cf. MV 15). “Let us enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God’s mercy” (MV 15). Our daily “living-in-mercy” is a duty for every Christian; it is not optional. Mercy addresses suffering / “poverty” of various types in the world: physical, spiritual, personal, structural, psychological, etc. Mercy is demanding; it is not easy; yes, its demands are often inconvenient and unpredictable; it impinges on our personal plans and schedules. We cannot calculate when mercy will be demanded of us. Mercy must spring from God’s love in our hearts (Rm 5:5); it is not only giving things, but giving ourselves. Drawn from Pope Francis’ own words, we now turn to a “mini-meditation” on each of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy as concrete ways of living out our call to mission.

CORPORAL WORKS OF MERCY. The seven corporal works of mercy are: ► Feed the hungry. ► Give drink to the thirsty. ► Clothe the naked. ► Shelter the homeless. ► Visit the sick. ► Visit the imprisoned. ► Bury the dead.

Feeding the Hungry. “We face a global scandal of around one billion—one billion!—people who still suffer from hunger today.... Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, I invite you to make space in your heart for this emergency of respecting the God-given rights of everyone to have access to adequate food.... Let us pray that the Lord may give us the grace to envision a world in which no one must ever again die of hunger” (12-9-13).

Giving Drink to the Thirsty. “Access to safe, drinkable water is a basic and universal human right, since it is essential to human survival and, as such, is a condition for the exercise of other human rights. Our world has a grave social debt toward the poor who lack access to drinking water, because they are denied the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity” (*Laudato Sí* 30).

Clothing the Naked. “To clothe the naked: what does it mean if not to restore dignity to one who has lost it? Certainly it means giving clothing to one who has none.... Likewise, not having a job, a house, a fair wage are forms of nakedness; being discriminated against on account of race, of faith, are all forms of ‘nakedness,’ to which as Christians we are called to be attentive, vigilant, and ready to act” (10-26-16).

Welcoming the Stranger. “As Church we should remember that in tending the wounds of refugees, evacuees, and the victims of trafficking, we are putting into practice the commandment of love that Jesus bequeathed to us when he identified with the foreigner, with those who are suffering, with all the innocent victims of violence and exploitation.... Let us not forget the flesh of Christ is in the flesh of refugees: their flesh is the flesh of Christ” (5-24-13).

Visiting the Sick. “With this work of mercy, the Lord invites us to do an act of great humanity: *sharing*.... Those who are sick often feel alone.... A visit can make a person who is sick feel less alone, and a little companionship is great medicine! A smile, a caress, a handshake are simple gestures, but they are very important.... When it is done in the Lord’s name, moreover, it also becomes an *eloquent and effective expression of mercy*” (11-9-16).

Visiting the Prisoner. “I think of those who are locked up in prison. Jesus has not forgotten them either. By including the act of visiting of those in prison among the works of mercy, he wanted first and foremost to invite us to judge no one.... Whatever a detainee may have done, he remains always loved by God.... I often think about detainees.... I feel they all need closeness and tenderness, because God’s mercy works wonders” (11-9-16).

Burying the Dead. “Many of you [Filipinos] have suffered greatly, not only from the destruction caused by the storm, but from the loss of family members and friends. Today let us commend to God’s mercy all those who have died and invoke his consolation and peace upon all who still grieve.... At the same time, let us thank the Lord for all those who have labored ... to visit the sick and the dying, to comfort the grieving, and to bury the dead.... Their goodness ... [is] a real sign that God never abandons us!” (1-17-15).

SPIRITUAL WORKS OF MERCY. The seven spiritual works of mercy are: ► Counsel the doubtful. ► Instruct the ignorant. ► Admonish sinners. ► Comfort the afflicted. ► Pardon offenses. ► Bear wrongs patiently. ► Pray for the living and the dead.

Counseling the Doubtful. “One of the more serious temptations that stifle boldness and zeal is a defeatism that turns us into querulous and disillusioned pessimists, ‘sourpusses’.... In today’s world there are innumerable signs ... of the thirst for God, for the ultimate meaning of life. And, in the desert people of faith are needed.... In these situations we are called to be living sources of water from which others can drink” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 85-86).

Instructing the Ignorant. “We help. We lead others to Jesus with our words and our lives, with our witness. I like to recall what Saint Francis of Assisi used to say to his friars: ‘Preach the Gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.’ Words come ... but witness comes first: people should see the Gospel, read the Gospel, in our lives.... [This] requires love, an ever stronger love for Christ, a love for his holy people” (9-27-13).

Admonishing Sinners. “The Gospel this Sunday, taken from Matthew 18:15-20, presents the theme of brotherly correction within the community of believers: that is, how I must correct another Christian when he does what is not good.... Jesus proposes a progressive intervention ... so that he or she is not lost.... The approach is one of sensitivity, prudence, humility, attention toward the one who committed a fault” (9-7-14).

Comforting the Afflicted. “The gift of piety means to be truly capable of rejoicing with those who rejoice, of weeping with those who weep, of being close to those who are lonely or in anguish, ... of welcoming and helping those in need.... The gift of piety, which the Holy Spirit gives us, makes us gentle, makes us calm, patient, at peace with God, at the service of others with gentleness” (6-4-14).

Pardoning Offenses. “I am always struck when I reread the parable of the merciful father [Lk 15:11-32].... Think of that younger son ... when he was at his lowest, he missed the warmth of the father’s house and he went back. And, the father? Had he forgotten the son? No, never.... The son has always been in his father’s heart.... As soon as he sees him still far off, he runs out to meet him and embraces him with tenderness, the tenderness of God” (4-7-13).

Bearing Wrongs Patiently. “In showing patience to those who wrong us and, by extension, to those we find irritating, we imitate God’s own patience with us sinners. Exercising patience with others also challenges us to reflect on our own conduct and failings.... We think of the patience shown by many parents, catechists, and teachers who quietly help young people to grow in faith and knowledge of the important things in life” (11-16-16).

Praying to God for the Living and the Dead. “Dear friends in Christ, know that I pray for you always! I pray for families! I do! I pray that the Lord may continue to deepen your love.... Do not forget Saint Joseph who sleeps! Jesus slept with the protection of Joseph. Do not forget: families find their rest in prayer.... Please pray also for me, for I truly need your prayers and will depend on them always! Thank you very much!” (1-16-15).

Reflection Questions: Why is the Eucharist the “source and goal of mission”? How does the Eucharist empower us for mission? Name one important insight from the Cebu IEC in 2016. How are the “works of mercy” manifestations of the Church-in-mission? Name and explain three “works of mercy” particularly needed in today’s world. NOTE: Consider viewing the film: *Mabuhay Lolo Kiko! Pagsulyap sa Pagbisita ng Santo Papa sa Pilipinas* (Jesuit Communications: 2015).

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