

The expectations of a bishop with regard to popular missions

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Introduction

May I first quote from the letter of Fr. Emeric: “We would like you to tell us, as a bishop, the unique contribution you expect from the popular missions for evangelization in your diocese and how they can be structured with the ordinary pastorate.”

This necessitates that I say something about my diocese.

When I arrived in it in 1981, I found it already had a thrust collegially arrived at two years before: *Solidarity with the Poor in the Formation/Creation of Basic Ecclesial Communities*.

This thrust will have some implications for the framework on which to structure the popular missions. And so, allow me to elaborate on it.

Solidarity with the Poor

Solidarity with the poor, among other things, would mean looking at our situation from the view point of the poor, the viewpoint of our Lord.

Solidarity with the poor implies to be present with the poor in their suffering. It means taking a stand with the poor as Jesus did.

It also demands a conversion by both priest and people in the understanding of priestly ministry: service of people, the mediation of God's love by affirming people in their humanity.

This also calls for ministerial restructuring: from being in control to being the coordinator, facilitator of the various communities of people that exist within the territory we refer to as a parish.

It also puts emphasis on the imperative of facilitating the continuous growth of these communities in order to help them become life-giving communities within the parish, diocese and the wider church.

This shift in structure makes central the most basic life-form of the local church - the individual *basic ecclesial community*.

Basic Ecclesial Communities

Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) are the Church itself at grassroots level or at the "base" understood as going directly to the "basis" of our faith - Jesus Christ, the Gospel, the Holy Spirit.

- basic, because its members are *for the most part* on the bottom rung of the social ladder: the poor, the tenants, the unemployed, the marginalized, and so on;
- basic in the communitarian sense, where one feels committed to the good of the other: a natural grouping of people meeting together to reflect on their life-situation in the light of the Word of God, to celebrate it in a way that has meaning for them and to work for its transformation.

At the most basic level of BECs, it would demand the creation of programs that facilitate a deeper sense of community, a willingness to share resources, a leadership structure for on-going formation for both leaders and members.

At the parish level it would demand the building up of a parish core team to facilitate and support the on-going in-service and coordination of the BECs.

At the diocesan level it would demand a program of formation and a coordinated support system for local community leaders and people.

Singular Contribution of Popular Missions

As a Bishop, then, of a diocese with such a thrust, I would expect the popular missions to orient the BECs towards a renewed appreciation for these three interrelated areas: Catechesis, Social Apostolate, and Worship.

This should be done in such a way that the BECs would be inspired and motivated to follow them up with their own structures of responsibilities.

But already at the evangelization through the popular missions they should be given some ideas about these areas.

Renewed catechesis

The first area of a renewed evangelization through the popular missions is a *renewed catechesis*. Not enough of the people are being catechized or are being catechized enough.

Christo-centric

This Catechesis must be *Christ-centered*. There is no compromising the centrality and primacy of Christ. Everything -the Blessed Virgin Mary, the saints, the sacraments, devotions, etc., all of which are esteemed by my people- must be taught in relation to Christ.

Rooted in the Word of God

If it is to be Christ-centered, catechesis must be *rooted in the Word of God*. Nothing and no one speaks better of the Incarnate Word of God than the scriptural Word of God. The Bible must once again become the primary catechetical book.

Authentically Filipino

Catechesis must also be authentically *Filipino*. It must be inculturated so that both the means of transmission of the message and the resources for assimilating, it are Filipino.

This inculturation of catechesis is a very necessary and urgent task. Without such an inculturation, either the Christian message remains alien to the Filipino, or the Filipino in accepting it risks being alienated from his culture.

Systematic

Finally, catechesis must be *systematic*, i.e., it must present in an ordered and programmed way the whole of the Good News from the Bible and Sacred Tradition, and as taught by the Church -- without distortion or diminution, but always taking into account the circumstances of the catechized.

This systematic catechesis must highlight the basics of Catholic belief and practice, and include as an integral part the social doctrine of the Church.

Renewed social apostolate

The second area of a renewed evangelization is a renewed *social apostolate*. The Church sees clearly now that Christian social action, i.e., action carried out by the Church and its members to promote human development, justice in society, and peace, is not only pre-evangelization, but is a task without which evangelization is not complete.

"Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel."

Renewed worship

The third area of a renewed evangelization through the popular missions is *worship*. In the Philippines worship has, unfortunately, been often separated from the totality of life. The liturgy is not seen as the source and apex of the Church's life. Rather, the liturgy is seen as a department of life without an intimate connection with social, economic and political life.

Renewal of Prayer Life

Part of this renewal of the worship life of our people is the renewal of the life of prayer. We should aim at the growth of prayer groups, charismatic groups, and religious movements. It would be good to see people congregate in gatherings in order to pray.

This prayer life needs to be further promoted. It is important to form people who can be teachers to others in prayer.

Renewal of Popular Piety

Renewal of Prayer Life will mean the use of *popular religious practices*. Filipino Catholic popular religious practices are rich in values. They manifest a thirst for God and make people capable of generosity and sacrifice in the manifestation of their faith.

But these popular religious practices must be fostered in such a way that they do not become distortions of religion or remain at the level of forms of worship, but become rather true expressions of faith.

We must make sure that devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the other saints are seen in relationship with, and in subordination to, Christ, the one Mediator between God and humankind. It seems that in practice the saints and the Blessed Virgin Mary occupy the attention of many of the simple faithful more than Christ does.

Liturgical Renewal

Big steps have already been taken to promote liturgical renewal in the Philippines so that the participation of the faithful in sacramental celebrations may be informed, active, full and communitarian. But much still needs to be done, especially in the field of liturgical education.

Among the more vital areas of renewal are: *pre-sacramental catechesis*, so that no sacrament is administered without first instructing the participants on the meaning of the sacraments they are to receive. This is especially needed for the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Marriage.

The renewal of the sacrament of Penance

This sacrament which is a celebration of God's mercy, has often been neglected both by priests and lay people. The pastors and faithful have to be educated to see in this sacrament an encounter with the Lord who reconciles us to himself and to his people.

Priests should make themselves available for this sacrament and seek creatively for ways to remedy the dangers of routine in the celebration of this sacrament. The creative use of public penitential celebrations will greatly help in the appreciation of this sacrament.

The inter-relatedness of these areas

It must be stressed that no true renewal, can happen in one area (e.g., catechesis), in isolation from the other two areas. Any genuine renewal must be holistic, i.e., it must affect all three areas in their inter-relationship.

However, the most basic area of renewal, and the one that must receive first priority is catechesis. Without education towards maturity in the faith, the social apostolate will become activism and will fall prey to the temptations of unchristian ideologies. Without catechesis, worship will degenerate into formalism and will slide into superstition and a magical mentality.

On the other hand, catechesis without the social apostolate will lack the power of Christian witness and transformation. And without worship, catechesis will become indoctrination.

Finally, the social apostolate without worship will lose its source of strength, while worship without the social apostolate will turn into worship divorced from life.

Having identified the areas of renewed evangelization through popular missions, I shall now outline its characteristics.

Characteristics of renewed evangelization

This renewed evangelization should be characterized by the clarity of its goals, and by a new fervor, new methods, and new expressions.

The Goals of Evangelization

Renewed evangelization must aim first of all at the formation of Catholics in an integral spirituality.

Evangelization must also seek to build up the Church, so that it becomes a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, a community of Christ's disciples, a visible mystery of communion and mission, and a sacrament, in Christ, of universal salvation.

Evangelization does not stop at the building of the Church. It seeks to transform the whole fabric of society according to the values of the Kingdom and of Christ and to promote total human development, integral liberation, justice in society and the cause of peace.

New Methods

The goals of the new evangelization in the Philippines can be pursued only with *new methods*, new in the sense that there is a renewed emphasis on them.

One aspect of the new methodology is the participative approach. It will call on everyone without exception to participate.

In catechesis people have to be consistently led to relate Christian truth to their real lives. Liturgy itself must aim at the full participation of the people. And the social apostolate must stimulate its beneficiaries to participate in their own development, in the struggle for justice, and in the work of peace.

Another aspect of the new methodology is the team approach to evangelizing. Individuals and groups band together to achieve their goals in the growing recognition of the existence of their own charisms and the charisms of others.

New Fervor

Such a participative approach is possible only if a *new fervor* is infused into all the members of the Christian community. Indeed, we are called to proclaim the Good News together, with the fervor of the saints, with an enthusiasm similar to that of the first disciples.

New Expressions

This new fervor and new method will demand *new expressions*. Today there are tremendous possibilities of transmitting the Good News through the *means of social communication*.

"New expressions" will also mean the use of symbols and languages understood by the people, expressions and words which touch their minds, hearts and souls.

We must also look into the culture of our people in order to discover which cultural expressions and symbols enter effectively and appeal to their hearts.

Let me end by saying that I am very grateful to the Vincentians for allowing me to join this Vincentian Month on the theme of the Popular Missions. Already in June of last year, in our yearly retreat my priests articulated in our Vision-Mission the setting up of a Diocesan Mission Team.

And I also anticipate my gratitude to all of you for the many lessons I am sure I shall learn from all of you during this month. All this shall be very helpful to me.

Thank you very much and God bless you.

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