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Mission: Telling God's Story

"This signal event is our first step as a local Church into the Third Millennium". With these words, Bishop Vicente C. Manuel, SVD, inaugurated a pivotal event in the life of the Philippine Church — the first National Mission Congress. The congress was projected to be, in Bishop Manuel's words, "a fitting culminating activity to end three years of intense preparation for the Great Jubilee of the year 2000".

The Bishop, who is Chairman of the Episcopal Commission on Missions, continued, "'Rejoice in the Lord, I say it again, rejoice' Saint Paul exhorted the Philippians. Let joy and rejoicing in the Lord be the pervading atmosphere and integrating mood of the congress." His words proved prophetic. "Cebu 2000", as the congress was popularly called, became a celebration of the Philippine Church, her faith, and her vocation-to-mission. The five-day congress (September 27-October 1, 2000), nearly two years in preparation, with its 2,300 delegates, proved to be a truly unique event for Asia's largest local Church in the Jubilee Year 2000.

This piece approaches the mission congress through a particular optic; it explores several key mission themes that emerged during the congress. These themes help unfold the reality and agenda of mission in the contemporary context of the Philippines and Asia.

Narrative Missiology

Story-telling in faith was the integrating methodology of the mission congress. This approach, employed by speakers, workshop coordinators, homilists and participants, emerges from the conviction that mission, at heart, means "Telling God's Story", God's love story, a love made personal and incarnate, the Jesus story; it is a story of great compassion and mercy, a salvation story.

Papal Legate, John Baptist Cardinal Wu of Hong Kong, noted that story-telling is a very biblical approach for conveying the message of divine truth and love. He recalled the fact that Jesus, the very source of mission, was a story-teller, constantly using parables to convey the exigencies of the kingdom. Jesus often answered both theoretical and practical questions (Who is my neighbor?) with stories like *The Good Samaritan* (Lk 10:30-37).

Cardinal Wu recalled that "missionaries have always told the story of their experience in preaching the Gospel. At the Council of Jerusalem, Peter told the story of his encounter with Cornelius. On his visits to Jerusalem, Paul recounted the story of the way in which the Gentiles received the faith. Francis Xavier wanted to run through the Universities of Europe, telling the story of his encounter with Asia and its millions of peoples waiting to receive the liberating truth of Christ".

Contemporary missionaries continue telling the story of Jesus in diverse contexts and challenging situations. Congress participants heard Bob McCahill, MM, narrate inspiring stories of encounter and service with Muslims in Bangladesh. Pio Estepa, SVD, recalled his mission experiences in Zaire, Latin America, and Oceania. Philippine mission narratives were recounted by Ruben Gomez, OMI, Louis Hechanova, CSsR, and former president Corazon C. Aquino. And, there were many more stories told and waiting to be told.

The "narrative missiology" served the congress and its participants well. It genuinely communicated, it inspired, it brought laughter, it engendered joyful enthusiasm, it strengthened faith, it elicited commitment. Story served as the vehicle to present and explain the many diverse dimensions of integral mission. Throughout the entire congress God's love story and the speakers' mission narratives became interwoven with the participants' own personal story of faith, love, and committed service. Everything served to create a new narrative — the "Cebu Story".

Jubilee Theme of Incarnation

The mission congress, a pivotal event in the Jubilee celebrations of the Philippine Church, explored the meaning of mission from within the Jubilee Year context, its grace and demands. What picture of mission emerges when it is viewed through the optic of the Incarnation of the Word of God?

Incarnational mission affirms, as Luis "Chito" Tagle explained, "God's total engagement in the lives and histories of human beings. The incarnation reveals a God who is not distant from humanity, but one who is near and in solidarity with humanity...". In the incarnate Word, as *Ecclesia in Asia* (11) notes, "Divine compassion has never been so immediately accessible". Seeing God as close to humans enables humans to be close to one another. Mission centers on enabling sharing, personal closeness, and community to happen — among Christians as well as among people of all living faiths.

In Jesus, missionary of the Father, one finds a unique "style" of presence among us, a kenotic incarnation. In Jesus' self-emptying, both God and humanity are revealed. Christians are called to be symbols of the self-effacing God they believe in. A kenotic God is seen in kenotic humans. *Kenosis* reveals the true face of God as well as the true face of humanity.

Contemporary mission, therefore, becomes servanthood. The missionary adopts, incarnates the "servant mind" of Jesus; this becomes, as Daniel Huang portrayed, the heart of missionary spirituality. It involves "self-forgetfulness, self-emptying, self-gift, dying — to comfort, to security, to privilege — for the sake of life ... [it means] ultimately to live a life of life-giving dying". The Jubilee Year of the Incarnation renews Christian mission by enabling the rediscovery of the face of Jesus — God's incarnate, kenotic Son.

Celebration of Faith

The mission congress — even in its inception — was envisioned to be an expression of faith. In the Philippine Bishops' pastoral letter on mission (July 5, 2000) they noted: "It is clear that the challenge of proclaiming Christ in Asia is a summons addressed *first of all* to us [Filipinos], to share the gift of faith that we ourselves received".

"Cebu 2000" included many manifestations of faith: daily prayers and Eucharistic liturgies, the prayer-vigil and faith-testimonies organized by the youth of Cebu, the pilgrimages to Cebu's churches, holy doors, and religious sites. Many participants testified that the congress was an "explosion" of the faith in their minds and hearts. One parish delegate from Manila said: "I had not expected to be so moved and my faith so greatly renewed. The congress was a gift to me...".

For most delegates, the highpoint of the Congress was the joyful mission-sending ceremony integrated into the closing Eucharist; Archbishop Orlando Quevedo, President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, presided over this most meaningful ritual. Each missionary received their mission cross: "Receive this sign of Christ's love and of our faith. Preach Christ crucified, who is the power and wisdom of God". The homilist gave a succinct challenge to all: "Filipinos everywhere! Learn your Faith, Live your Faith, Share your faith".

Vocation-to-Mission

The Cebu congress as well as the Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Mission emphasize the unique role of the Philippine Church for mission in Asia. A renewed mission response by Catholic Filipinos at this time in history is viewed as a *kairos*, a true hour of grace; there is a new insistence and urgency to fulfill the Lord's mission mandate and to "tell the world of His love".

All the popes, at least from Pius XI to the present, have spoken of this Philippine vocation-to-mission. During his 1981 Philippine visit Pope John Paul II declared: "I wish to tell you of my special desire: that the Filipinos will become the foremost missionaries of the Church in Asia". In 1995 in Manila during the World Youth Day, the Holy Father renewed the invitation for Catholics to proclaim Christ, his Gospel, and his love to Asia.

Mission statistics add urgency to the desired response of Filipino Catholics, since they represent well over 50% of all Asian Catholics. Asia, the vast continent of 60% of humanity, contains 85% of the world's non-Christians. The Lord asks: "Whom shall I send?" Frequently during the congress the delegates prayed together: "He we are, Lord Jesus, send us in your Name".

The congress final statement affirms that this "vocation-to-mission" will be realized both within the Philippines and also *ad gentes*, to the peoples of the great continent of Asia and beyond. This vocational commitment was concretized — with profound impact — in the "mission-sending ritual" at the conclusion of the congress: women and men missionaries were commissioned and sent forth; the assembled delegates applauded, sprinkled flowers, sang with gusto, and prayed for the departing missionaries: "Lord, look kindly on your servants we send forth as messengers of salvation and peace.... Guide their steps.... Make their words the echo of Christ's voice.... Fill the hearts of your missionaries with the Holy Spirit".

Integral Evangelization

Mission today is understood — and implemented — in a comprehensive, holistic, integral manner; this means, to quote Pope Paul VI, that evangelization will bring "the Good News into all strata of humanity" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 18). The congress aimed at presenting all the different components of integral evangelization: (a) Witness of Christian Life; (b) Service of Humanity; (c) Interreligious Dialogue and Inculturation; (d) Explicit Gospel Proclamation; and, (e) Prayer, Contemplation, Liturgy and Sacraments.

Major presentations on each of these essential topics were given by *de facto* missionaries from at home and abroad. They narrated their mission stories and experiences — how they proclaim the Jesus story in a variety of life situations, among peoples of different faiths and cultures. These narratives were enhanced by deep faith insights, emerging from an integration of the missionary's own experience and reflection. Twenty specialized workshops held on the afternoons of the congress enabled further delegate participation and exploration of diverse themes — all directed to an "integral" understanding of contemporary mission.

Communion of Saints

A unique element of the "Cebu Story" would be missing if one did not appreciate the role and presence of the whole missionary Church — including the saints in glory. Significant congress events were held at the Santo Niño Pilgrim Center, adjacent to the famous Basilica de Santo Niño; all delegates revered the Santo Niño image as they entered the assembly hall.

Filipino's love for Mother Mary manifested itself readily during the congress. As the *pueblo amante de Maria*, the local Church appreciates Mary's role as the "Morning Star of Evangelization", active in the history of the Philippines. Cardinal Sin noted in his Eucharistic homily that "Our [Filipinos] special gift in mission will be our love of Our blessed Lady". He prayed: "Teach us, each according to his or her own calling, to say Yes to your Son, in the grace of the Holy Spirit".

Francis Xavier and Thérèse of Lisieux, the co-patrons of mission, were present to the congress in a unique way. First-class relics of these missionary saints were secured especially for the congress; they were prominently displayed in a reliquary, along with medallions of Lorenzo Ruiz and Pedro Calungsod. By felicitous planning the final day of the congress was Sunday, October 1, Saint Thérèse's feastday. Cardinal Wu spoke movingly of the contemplative dimension of mission in his homily at the closing Eucharist; he challenged all delegates to "think globally, act locally, and live contemplatively".

Saint Lorenzo Ruiz's feastday fortuitously fell on the second day of the congress (September 28). His faith-witness in Japan was recalled: "I am a Christian and I will remain so until the hour of my death.... I would rather die a thousand deaths than renounce my faith". Ruiz's life and martyrdom challenged congress delegates: "To die for the faith is a gift to some, to live the faith is a call to all".

The presence of Blessed Pedro Calungsod, noble son of the Church of Cebu, permeated the congress. His March 5, 2000 beatification, the first of the Jubilee Year, remained fresh in people's minds. Everyone rejoiced and recalled how "Beato Pedro," the virtual unknown, seemed to dash from behind and arrive at the frontline for his beatification. Cardinal Vidal asked congress delegates to regard Calungsod as "our model and example of a true missionary".

Joyful Evangelizers

Without doubt, the mission congress unfolded in an atmosphere of joy and celebration. Bishop Manuel, overall congress chairman, noted how "the happy, festive atmosphere of the congress was contagious". Catechists, laity, priests, nuns, and bishops enjoyed their travel to Cebu (many for the first time); everyone met old friends and even relatives; authentic Filipino hospitality was abundant; the first evening was given over to a dramatic presentation on the life of Pedro Calungsod, and the last evening was highlighted by a "barrio fiesta" at the residence of Cardinal Vidal — complete with song, dance, lechon, and a variety program.

Pope Paul VI always emphasized the need for "joyful evangelizers" to effectively spread the Good News. "Cebu 2000" captured and expressed the "joy of mission"; an infectious celebratory atmosphere was pervasive. For several foreign visitors — especially those from Rome — the joyful, yet prayerful, enthusiasm was unique among mission congresses. Indeed, happy, joy-filled missionaries are gifts from God!

The "Cebu Story"

The written word fails to adequately capture and convey all the diversity and richness that comprised the first-ever Philippine National Mission Congress. "Cebu 2000", blessed with the Lord's abundant grace, enriched with the intercession of Mary, Queen of Missions and Mother of Asian Peoples, was a gift — a truly generous gift — to the Church in the Philippines.

Congress delegates, representing every ecclesiastical circumscription in the Philippines, religious women and men, laity and lay movements, especially the youth, departed from Cebu — with joyful hearts. For them, the "hour of mission" had sounded; it rang out loud and clear—a *kairos*, a most opportune moment to renew missionary commitment by word, by worship, by witness, by work! The moment of departure became a personal "going forth" in deed and in truth".

"Cebu 2000" stands at the beginning of a new millennium, a new age in mission, a time of renewed commitment to Pope John Paul II's dream: "that Filipinos will become the foremost missionaries of the Church in Asia"!

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