***Evangelization Old and New***

Presentation to Pacific Bishops on Guam, 2013

*Initial Evangelization*

* Marianas first evangelized in late 1600s by Spanish Jesuits out of Philippines. San Vitores and 11 other Jesuits, along with two dozen mission helpers killed in this attempt. Massive loss of population and considerable cultural change. Campaign against ancestral skulls.
* Catholics followed the Protestants (LMS, Methodists, and Congregational Church) to most other island groups in the Pacific.
* SSCCs (Picpus) enter in the 1830s, beginning with eastern Polynesia (Loyalty Islands and Gambiers) after expulsion from Hawaii, and moving to the central Pacific.
* Marists enter the scene a few years later, moving to the west (where they took responsibility for a new vicariate), and starting work in Wallis and Futuna. Peter Chanel a martyr on Futuna.
* By the 1840s, the Marists had moved into Fiji, Samoa and Tonga in the central Pacific. They formed small congregations there, but for years afterwards the central Pacific belonged to the Protestant churches that had preceded the Catholics to this area.
* Early attempts in Micronesia and Melanesia: SSCCs (Fr. Maigret and mission helpers) to Pohnpei in 1830s, but the group stayed for only six months before departing. Marists began work in the Solomons in the mid-1840s, but left after a few years. Bishop Jean-Baptiste Epalle and four others lost their lives during this time. The one success in Melanesia was in New Caledonia from 1850 on, but even that required the protection of the French warships and annexation.
* Melanesia presented more difficulties than Polynesia due to malaria, tribal warfare (no real chiefly system), and attacks on missionaries to rob their supplies. Effective presence of the church was established only late in the century.
* Micronesia, too, was evangelized late–by the Spanish Capuchins in the Carolines during the 1880s and 1890s, and in the Marshalls and Nauru by German MSCs in the early 20th century.

*Refitting the Church to the Culture*

* Early evangelization meant distancing the faith from the culture at first: like early Christians challenge to the Roman gods and military, or Boniface chopping down the sacred oak dedicated to the god Thor.
* Catholic missionaries in eastern Polynesia busy knocking down the maraes, or building churches on the sites of old maraes. They did battle against sexual promiscuity and the island dances that were associated with sexual abandon. They worked to end inter-island warfare and everything in the culture associated with it. (But Catholics not as bad as Protestants!)
* But at some point, the church must take on some of the features of the culture in which it has been transplanted–inculturation. This is always the second step in the dynamics of the establishment of the church, although sometimes it must wait until the church leadership is local.
* Obvious examples are church music (rewritten by islanders), and the use of cultural elements in the liturgy. Example from Micronesia:

*Flower leis were placed on the heads of the newly baptized to signify the title they were receiving with the sacrament, and they were presented to the one presiding at the liturgy along with the gifts of bread and wine. During special liturgies in some churches, large feasting bowls were carried up, in time with traditional dance steps, at the presentation of gifts. Dances and chants were incorporated into various parts of the services. In a ritual evocative of the Pohnpeian ceremony conducted when forgiveness was being asked of a chief, sakau (kava) was symbolically offered to the Lord in communal reconciliation services held on Pohnpei. In Yap, famous for its dignified dances, distinctive island wailing and stately women’s dances were introduced into the Holy Week services.*

* Other examples of inculturation of church life: means of raising money, proliferation of titles in parish, church celebrations (evocative of island parties), *mwichen asor* in Chuuk for those with drinking problems.
* Inculturation is not done once and for all, but is an on-going process. After all, culture is changing everywhere, Western societies as well as Pacific. The church is required to keep up and respond.

*Where Are We Now?*

* Catholic Church has been planted and taken root. It is a respected institution with a long history in the islands and significant contributions made, especially in the area of education and health–what we might call human development. It maintains its schools, innovative when started, even today.
* The church is a force in island society today. It has a voice, if it chooses to use it. Christianity has been woven into the fabric of island society in many ways. One small example: government meetings almost always begin with a prayer.
* The membership of the Catholic Church has been stable over the last 20 or 30 years, even as some of the Protestant churches have seen a shrinking of their congregations. (Studies of the small religious groups in the Pacific in the early 90s by Manfred Ernst provide the data to support this.)
* Problem of domestication–“business as usual” approach. Our responsibility is to maintain our links with the past and to faithfully pass on the ancient truths of the faith. Sense of urgency lost? Perhaps also the importance of personal encounter with the Lord?
* Two challenges today: secularism (or New Religious Groups) and the sects. Both stem from the rapid change of modernization (happening everywhere in the Pacific). They respond in very different ways and come from opposite sides, but both call us to a new evangelization today. Both ask the same fundamental question: How does what you preach make any difference in our lives?
* Sects: looking for a safe place in a world of rapid change–retreat into the core of their hearts. They challenge us to touch their hearts, not just their heads. Catholic convert to Pentecostals: “like eating mackerel fried with onions rather than mackerel right out of the can.”
* Secularists: challenge us to speak to the world at large and deliver on our mission to be prophets of salvation. Not that we can save the world, but we have to offer prophetic signs of the Kingdom of God, just as Jesus did.

*Presenting the Gospel Message Anew*

* In our new evangelism today–our celebration of the Year of Faith–we must respond to the challenge by 1) preaching a personal faith that speaks to the heart, that takes the emotional dimension of hearers seriously; and 2) offering signs to the world of the salvation we proclaim through Jesus. The Good News must speak to individuals, in their personal neediness; and it must speak to the world, broken and in need of healing.
* 1) *Personal faith*. Tip from the small sects: help our people recover the sense of God’s personal call to them–a summons to their heart not just their head. Revival of personal faith in the Lord.
* admit the limits of our understanding of God–God as mystery, doctrine is important but so are the limits of doctrine.
* emphasis on God’s personal call to his people: love of God for persons, call to the heart.

This is as important as passing on the inherited faith to the next generation–indeed it is an essential component of it. Remember that salvation is more a story than a formula. Just because evangelicals exaggerate the force of the emotional, we should not be lured into excluding it from the gospel message.

* 2) *Signs of salvation*. Church must be seen as an image of “salvation” by the people of the Pacific today–a compelling sign of God’s saving love for his people. In OT times, the liberation of the Jewish people from bondage in Egypt was the definitive sign of salvation. In the early days of evangelization in Pacific, this sign of liberation (or salvation) was perhaps offered by schools and health care (at a time when there was none), and by helping people transcend regional boundaries to offer a grounding for peace in places where warfare was the norm.
* As James says in his letter, we can’t send “hungry” people away with a blessing and tell them that they will be saved. What can we as church do today to symbolize this salvation?

\* Perhaps through schools, but possibly by extending education to the public (as MicSem tried to do). Examples: assist people in understanding how families have been refashioned through the impact of a money economy, changing gender roles in society, making sense of the changes.

\* Or perhaps, taking a less educational approach, to provide real support for the castoffs and those left behind by modernization. (Ministry in detention centers in US)

* The church must preach as Jesus did, by deeds as well as by words. Just as Jesus proclaimed the Good News by opening the eyes of the blind and healing the sick and feeding the hungry, the church must continue to be a sign of salvation and liberation to all. This includes the secularists, who are not open to any sort of preaching.

*Conclusion*

* The church is always being reformed and evangelization is always being renewed. But if you want broad categories, we can speak of the first evangelization (coming of Catholicism), the refitting of the church to culture (inculturation), and the renewed attempts at evangelization made necessary by forces in today’s world.
* This evangelization should be personal and social, attempts to reach individuals and societies. The evangelization, like Jesus’s own ministry, should be in deed as well as in word. We must be ready to proclaim the Good News, while also demonstrating a bit of what it might mean for us all. Finally, it must be seen to be liberating in some form.
* As the church in the Pacific does this, it represents itself not just as a club of the saved, but a force that seeks to stir hearts and win souls.