

A NEW AGE OF MISSION

The joyous and grateful celebration of the 400th anniversary of the foundation of the diocese of Manila has brought us together — Bishops, priests, religious men and women, representatives of the laity from some forty countries and every continent in the world, in an International Congress on Mission co-sponsored by the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and by the Pontifical Mission Aid Societies of the Philippines.

It was fitting that our gathering together began as an act of thanksgiving, for the first and most spontaneous sentiment that arises in our hearts is truly an act of gratitude to the merciful love of the Father in Jesus Christ His Son. For He has called us and our peoples into His marvelous light, and given us the good news that is His Gospel, and the gift, beyond all pricing, of our Faith, of baptism and fellowship in the community of the Church. He has given us the gift of His Spirit poured out into our hearts, the Spirit through whom we call Him Father, the Spirit through whom we call each other — of whatever race and color and nation, — brother and sister beloved in His Son, our Brother Jesus Christ.

We raise an act of gratitude to God for all those who have brought the Gospel, and with dedication and self-sacrifice planted and nurtured the Church not only in Manila and in this Christian country, but also throughout Asia, — from the very time of the Apostles, when Christian faith first came to this continent. We recall with grateful reverence the scores of Asian martyrs whose blood has watered the faith that we treasure and proclaim today.

Several assemblies of our Asian Bishops and their collaborators have preceded ours, and many of them have situated the work of evangelization in this continent within the context of this vast and varied, this restless and swiftly-changing world of nearly two and a half million people, nearly two-thirds of all mankind. Like them we have been deeply moved by a vision of a new world being born, of millions of men and women in search of new social structures and relationships, of a renewed humanity.

We discern a common search, every year more tangible and increasingly more articulate, for light in the midst of so much confusion and groping, for life in the midst of so much suffering, conflict and death, for love in an age of growing violence, oppres-

sion and inhumanity. In a sense this search is a search of many centuries, even of millennia, but no one will deny that in breadth, restlessness and urgency it is indeed new, and that it defines the turbulent history of our time.

The ancient religions and religious traditions of this part of the world, which in the past have shaped the histories of our people, and which are written into the very fabric of our cultures, our character, our very humanity, have reawakened in a remarkable manner in the last few decades. They too, are joined in this effort to seek a better way and to create a new world of the future for our peoples.

We Christians and the Church with us are part of this common search. In this Congress we have realized anew how great a challenge this moment of history places before the Gospel and the Church. We have heard the imperatives it addresses to all of us who, in all unworthiness, have yet been chosen to tell the story of Jesus, to speak His message before our brothers and sisters, and as His people to carry His Spirit and live His life in our own, to bear His light so that by it we ourselves and others may come to the Truth and the fullness of life all men seek.

Throughout Asia a profound religious sense still remains and many retain and cherish religious values, which greatly influence their lives. But many too, have begun to turn away from religions, partly because of the inroads of materialism and secularism, partly too because they have been disillusioned by men of religion. In some similar way many have turned away too, from ideologies and political systems because they have been betrayed by leaders who have failed them, by promises not kept and hopes which have not been fulfilled.

Many in our Asian countries have in diverse ways met Christ and His Gospel and have been deeply attracted by them. With sorrow we confess that many have not been equally drawn to the Church because so often they did not see in us, in our institutions and in our lives the image and the realization of the Good News we proclaim. Have we not too frequently made His message mere words and doctrines, His deeds mere precepts and practices, His life merely a complex of rites and institutions?

We believe that what our peoples are seeking they will find in Jesus and His Gospel. This conviction is born from our own experience of faith, hope and love. And yet somehow we have not been able to find ways to release this power of the Gospel, so that it can truly reach and move the minds and hearts of multitudes of our

Asian peoples. We have not spoken His Word and lived out His deeds in such a way that these are heard and seen as bearing the promises and hopes of the future of mankind.

Thus the communities of Christian faith in Asia are challenged to an ever renewed conversion to God's Word, and (as the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* tells us) to a constant reevangelization of themselves (EN, 15). They are ever summoned to a deepening of faith and life in the experience of the power of the Spirit. They must respond creatively to the imperatives of a deeper and more extensive inculturation of the Christian life, so that our Asian peoples may find the Christian existence and message truly transparent to Jesus and His Gospel, genuinely vibrant with His life.

We do not, of course, now face these challenges and try to respond to them for the first time. Already, we believe, the Spirit has been at work among the faithful, quickening their response. Already we discern, with wonder and gratitude, some signs of this renewal even now taking place in our local churches.

There is today an undeniable thirst and hunger for prayer and contemplation. We see this all around us, but especially among the laity, especially among the young. Surely this is a sign of the presence and action of the Spirit. There is the longing to hear and reflect on the Word of God, especially with others in a community of prayer. There is the eucharistic assembly increasingly celebrated and experienced as truly the heart of the Christian's pilgrimage through life. There is the desire in many also for greater simplicity of life and even the experience of poverty as a following of Jesus, and as solidarity with the suffering and powerless poor. There is the increased commitment to tasks and struggles for justice and human rights. There is, in some countries, the rapid multiplication of "grassroots ecclesial communities," so often alive with the freshness and enthusiasm of early Christian times. In these communities an experience of genuine Christian fellowship and love is often found as well as the emergence of diverse charisms and ministries. These enable the laity to participate ever more actively in every phase of ecclesial life. There are the new missionary initiatives among the former "mission churches", i.e. among priests and religious, and — most encouraging of all — among the laity.

It is our belief, confirmed by the exchanges of this Congress, that with God's grace this reevangelization and renewal of our local churches is a promise and earnest of a new age of mission. Through it the Holy Spirit, we are convinced, is readying them for a true renewal of mission in Asia and throughout the world.

What is the newness of this "new age of mission?" First, the realization in practice that "mission" is no longer, and can no longer be, a one-way movement from the "older churches" to the "younger churches," from the churches of the old Christendom to the churches in the colonial lands. Now — as Vatican II already affirmed all clarity and force — every local church is and cannot be but missionary. Every local church is "sent" by Christ and the Father to bring the Gospel to its surrounding milieu, and to bear it also into all the world. For every local church this is a **primary task**. Hence we are moving beyond both the vocabulary and the idea of "sending churches" and "receiving churches" for as living communities of the one church of Jesus Christ, every local church must be sending church, and every local church (because it is not on earth ever a total realization of the Church) must also be a receiving church. Every local church is responsible for its mission, and cor-responsible for the mission of all its sister-churches. Every local church, according to its possibilities, must share whatever its gifts are, for the needs of other churches, for mission throughout mankind, for the life of the world.

Once again, what is the newness of this "new age of mission"? We believe that the Spirit of the Lord calls each people and each culture to its own fresh and creative response to the Gospel. Each local church has its own vocation in the one history of salvation, in the one Church of Christ. In each local church each people's history, each people's culture, meanings and values, each people's traditions are taken up, not diminished nor destroyed, but celebrated and renewed, purified if need be, and fulfilled (as the Second Vatican Council teaches in *Ad Gentes*) in the life of the Spirit.

In many christian communities in our midst something of this "original vocation to the Gospel" so often emerges. We may discern how, in the Spirit, they become manifestation of the joyousness, freedom and purity that the grace of Christ brings to full flowering within the heart of every people, race and nation. This actualization of the unique vocation of peoples within the catholic unity we cannot but rejoice in.

It is then with an immense joy and hope, despite what seems like the gathering darkness of our time, that we foresee the dawning of this "new age of mission." We do this, not in any spirit of triumphalism or vain glory. Rather we believe in the perennial youthfulness the Spirit gives to the Church. For by His action and charisms He constantly quickens God's holy people to new life and new initiatives. Our task is to follow where He leads us, to discern His guidance amidst the many movements of our age, and to second it with all the courage and fidelity at our command.

This task of renewal of our local churches in the Gospel and by the power of the Spirit, we must admit, still has a long way to traverse. The discussions of this Congress have made us see with even greater evidence how much remains to be done in all the crucial areas of evangelization we tried to take up in our reflection. In our consensus papers we have developed this agenda more fully.

It suffices for the present to indicate here the continued building up of the local church as the focus of the task of evangelization today, with dialogue as its essential mode, through a more resolute, more creative and yet truly discerning and responsible inculturation; through inter-religious dialogue undertaken in all seriousness; through solidarity and sharing with the poor and the advocacy of human rights; through the creation of "grassroots ecclesial communities" with structures of genuine corresponsibility and ministries of charism and service; through the fostering of evangelizing education in schools and by non-formal education modes, and through an adequate media-ministry.

A more thorough-going renewal is called for in catechesis, in the knowledge and study of the Scriptures, in our methods of formation for ministries, in the fostering of family life within contemporary society, in forms and processes of our institutional structures, in the life-style of our clergy and other leaders, in the hierarchy of values we set for ourselves and our communities, and the like.

This congress has reawakened our awareness of what mission today and in the future, especially in Asia, demands of us. It has shown us more clearly what ongoing efforts and labors it will ask of us for many years to come. For we have reached a decisive turning point in the mission history of the Third World. There is no return to the past, neither to the past mission theories, nor to past mission methods, nor to the past mission goals.

We commit ourselves to these tasks of reevangelization and renewal, and to the new tasks of mission which the future demands of us, with a resoluteness born of our confidence in the promise of Jesus who told us that He would be with us all days until the end of time.

The exchange of this assembly have impressed on us how small we are in number and influence in the world of Asia, and throughout the globe. We have seen how inadequate we are for the mission to.

We conclude this Congress on Mission with the conferral of mission mandate and cross to seventy Filipino men and women who will, from this country, bear the Word of the Lord to almost every

part of the earth. Gathered around the Special Envoy of our Holy Father, officiating at this rite, we joyfully reaffirm our bonds of communion with the Roman Pontiff, Pope John Paul II. From this assembly we send our greetings to him and to the bishops, priests, religious and laity in all our sister-churches, in Asia and all the other continents of the world.

We wish to turn to our parish priests and parishes which have supported the work of mission through the years, to catechists on whom so much of the work of evangelization depends, and in a special way to the youth whom today above all the Lord summons to fields "white already for the harvest."

We address ourselves too, to the religious men and women who have rendered such outstanding service in the tasks of mission. *Evangelii nuntiandi* has spoken of the religious life itself as a privileged means for effective evangelization; with deep gratitude for the past we seek to affirm our support.

We thank our brothers and sisters in other Christian churches who have carried out in times past and up to today such great missionary labors. We are grateful for the participation of their observers, and pray for the increase of collaborative efforts and common Christian witness to the world.

To our brothers and sisters of the "living faiths of Asia" we send, in the heart of Christ, a special message of brotherhood and peace. Joined with them in the common quests for truth and freedom, justice and love for our peoples, we pray that the coming decade may be one of greater mutual understanding, forgiveness, collaboration and oneness.

We speak again to our fellow Christians in the widening Asian "Church of silence" as well as all those who suffer under totalitarian regimes of every kind. We have noted with sadness the absence of those whom we expected to be with us at this assembly. We know of the steadfastness of their faith, the courage of their suffering, the fidelity of their witness. We have kept them in our hearts and in our prayers during this Congress, and reach out to them in solidarity and with shared hope and trust in the Lord.

We wish to call to the urgent attention of our fellow-Christians as well as to that of all governments and of all people of good will and compassion, the desperate plight and the terrible suffering of hundreds of thousands of refugees from different countries, but especially those from Indo-China, now in camps or on the high

seas or seeking to cross frontiers. We urge on all to show them the concern, acceptance and welcome that they so greatly need as being in a special way the poor and the powerless in our midst. We ask the leaders of nations to do all they can to come to their relief and assistance. And we call on our fellow-Christians in Asia and other parts of the world to translate into deeds on their behalf the many statements of our concern for the poor and the suffering, the deprived and oppressed of the earth.

We close this Congress, which has been for all of us a source of joy and grace, on the eve of the Feast of Our Lady's Immaculate Conception, patroness of this entire land. We recall with gratitude the role She has played in the evangelization of this Christian people, and in the faith and devotion that is their today: in almost every home her image is found, in almost every corner of this nation her shrines are placed. We turn to her during this Advent season, asking her to pray that the Good News her Son brought to the world may reach more and more hearts, and that the fulfillment of His prayer that all when men may be one might be more fully realized in our time.