

E-BULLETIN #29

"Let the holiness of God shine forth" (cf. Mt 5,16)

item 61

Winter Acculturation Program



On July 29th I left Melbourne for Sydney to attend the Winter Acculturation Program. It was for me another interesting experience as a missionary in Australia. Sessions took place in St Joseph's Religious Center in Baulkham Hills. Sixteen priests and three nuns attended: six priests from Africa coming from Cameroon 1, Ghana 1, Kenya 1 and Tanzania 3; one priest from Poland, four priests from India, one from Tonga, five from Vietnam, and three sisters from Vietnam too. The course was headed by a Columban priest (Fr Brian) and a Josephite nun (Sr Annie), supported by other invited priests, nuns and a panel of lay people. The diversity of origin of participants and their different ministries in the Church made the time very rich in teaching and content.

In the beginning of that Program, which lasts eight days, a meditation on Exodus 3:5 led by Sister Annie and Fr Brian reflected on our lands: the land we came from (our homeland) and the land that welcomes us (Australia). From that meditation, I could identify the call God addressed to each one of us, and how it is amazing to respond to that invitation to move to another country – a gift in order to share with others the treasure granted to us. Hearing the local history and culture, after sharing ours, I was convinced that like other countries Australia has its unique history full of stories. And making comparisons of its culture with others could be dangerous. I was emotional to learn how the first people (Aborigine people) were deeply wounded because those coming from outside did not know and did not recognize their culture. Aborigines were treated like sub-humans. Failing to recognize a culture of someone is an attempt to dishonour their identity. Fortunately the former Australian Prime Minister, recognizing what happened in the past, apologized deeply for this bad historical behaviour.

Through our sharing with presenters and participants I understood better that each culture is a gift to humanity, because it transmits many values. The Australian culture with its values like pragmatism, fair go for mates, optimism about change, hospitality, is the one I must know and assume absolutely, if the missionary I am wants to understand those he talks to and lives with. That good understanding allows one to avoid culture shock and to communicate better in the new environment. I am able to develop the skills of communication by listening and asking questions of Australian people who are very open-minded to help whoever wants to know more about them. Their good mood, their sincerity and their love of jokes make the relationship easy and agreeable. To multiply our cultural experience during our stay in Sydney evening prayer, with songs and praise, was made with all the native languages of the participants.

In another session, discovering the land of Australia, its people and “its Church” gave me an enlarged view of its components, especially of Aboriginal people who were the first inhabitants. But we didn’t hear more about them during sessions. On the other hand, some famous characters like Mary Mackillop and Ned Kelly were presented to show the greatness of the values and virtues lived by people of the land. Seeing how a large number of immigrants flow into Australia from everywhere, mostly from Asia, but also from the Middle East and Africa, and how they are kindly integrated in the society, one can no doubt affirm that Australia is one of the most hospitable countries today in the world.

I was particularly impressed with the personal reflection each of us did concerning our own ecclesiology, in order to understand how rich is the Church’s ecclesiology. Looking back to the priest, the words and the actions that marked my life when I was young prompted me to recall my parish priest who baptized me, my dad, a good Christian who showed me the way of the Church, and the catechist of my village who taught me the importance of service and solidarity in society. All these persons and things certainly continue to influence my work today. They are gifts granted to me by God. These gifts are the ones I have to share with the people of God in my new environment. They help me to understand and to realize the ecclesiology of the Church.

As well this conference in Sydney taught me that paying attention to the culture of people I am living with, and respecting their values, is very important if I want to COLLABORATE to build a culture of peace and development for efficient evangelization. Success of life and evangelical ministry in Australia will depend on the mutual respect of cultures and right relationships between different sorts of persons: men and women, children and adults, religious, lay people and clergy. This is what I personally understood once more, both during the excursion to the city, via the River Cat ferry, and when we participated in Sunday Mass at the Memorial Chapel of St Mary MacKillop. For example, in Australia, it seems to be normal for a priest to attend Mass, sitting among the congregation with lay people and then, continuing his everyday life even if he does not offer the Sacrifice with other priests on the Altar. It is the culture of equality of all. Yes, respecting a culture invites me to understand that what is shocking for me could be very normal for others in that culture.



In addition to what I learned I was helped to overcome from the beginning my fear due to my English speaking. I got confidence with myself when discovering that I am not the only one with English language difficulties. I was very encouraged when hearing that my English expression is clear and understandable.

At the end of the course, which was very interesting for all of us, we regretted not having any occasion to make personal contact with Aboriginal people. In future inviting one of them, or a panel of Aborigines, to talk with participants will give more substance to the Evangelization action being promoted. This experience gave me a new vision for my future pastoral life, and I started to comprehend others who do not share the same culture with me. As pastor and a minister of religion I was very impressed by the good advice and teaching concerning management and leadership. I think that listening more, sharing and being involved concretely, would help anybody towards good management and leadership. The best way to achieve this is “to go the people, live with them, learn from them, start with what they know and build with what they have. For, with the best leaders, when the work is done and the task accomplished, the people will say ‘we have done this ourselves’.”

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the gift of presence is free

There's always a good time to read an Easter story, being Easter people. And the message from Brisbane [Canossian Sister Melissa Dwyer](#), a school principal in Malawi, Africa, is an enduring reminder of how simple it is to give generously.

A student came into my office yesterday. She had come back to school after Easter one week late and I was scolding her for missing classes. She will sit for national examinations in a few weeks, and I was concerned about her missing valuable learning time.

Then she explained to me what had happened.

She told me she didn't have money for transport to return to school. She said she didn't have school fees. She said she didn't have exercise books to write in and that she hadn't even had her own pen since September last year.

I asked her how she was managing to write notes in class without even a pen. She explained that she borrows from her friends.

Some of them get angry when she never returns their pens. Others just understand that she's poor.

As this tiny 11-year old girl explained the situation of her father's job loss and her mother's subsequent departure, tears streamed down her face.

I just wanted to hold her. I wanted to tell her everything would be alright. I wanted to do something to make life better. My few consoling words seemed to do little to ease the pain on her face and the worry in her heart.

All she wants is a chance at education.

She doesn't want a pen. She doesn't want an exercise book. These things are temporary. But she wants to build herself a future, and through education, she can do that.

It struck me as an educator, how we have a big responsibility. Yet sometimes it's easy to forget how important our role is in the lives of those young people we walk with each day.

It's easy to get caught up in examinations, delivery of syllabus in time, lesson preparation and producing good results. We can even run the risk of getting lost in competing for results and lose sight of what we are really educating for – to help the students we teach to become all that they are called to be.

Students should leave out schools not just with good results, but as better people, with a firm foundation for the journey of life. What a huge task this is, to care for the development of each individual.

Yet sometimes we spend so much time running between staff meetings, timetables and preparing activities that we miss the child who is waiting for just two minutes of our time to ask her how she is.

And it's not just in schools where the person is waiting for us to be fully present to them. It might be an elderly patient in a hospital who just wants us to give a few minutes to hold their hand.

It might be a neighbour who is struggling but we just wave as we walk by and brighten their day. It might be a fellow shopper in the supermarket whom we don't even know, but as we pass by we smile and that makes a difference. In today's society with the worldwide economic crisis, maybe we don't have money to financially make a difference to someone's life. Yet the gift of presence is free, and perhaps is more significant than most things money can provide. The story of this girl remained with me. To not even have a pen to write with is almost inconceivable. Yet this girl is one of many who would consider themselves lucky to even have the chance at education.

The more I think of the story of this student, the more I remember the hope that Easter brings us. With the resurrection of Jesus, we believe in life after death.

We trust that light will overcome darkness. We hope in a better tomorrow. Sometimes this hope is all that people have to hold on to.

Let us try to be more conscious of the gift of presence. Let us try to be more attentive to those whom we meet. And let us give them what we have – the gift of our presence, and the hope and the joy of the Risen Christ who promises us that He is with us always.

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