Meeting of the 5th International Conference and Assembly International Association of Catholic Missiologists

July 15-21, 2013, Nairobi, Kenya

“MISSIO INTER-GENTES: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES”

Introduction

From July 15 to 21, 2013, some 40 women and men from every continent gathered together in Nairobi, Kenya—at Dimesse House of Spirituality and The Catholic University of Eastern Africa—to attend the Fifth International Conference and General Assembly of the International Association of Catholic Missiologists on the theme, “Missio Inter-Gentes: Challenges and Opportunities.” This was the first time IACM has met on the continent of Africa and Madagascar. We have been blessed by our gracious hosts, welcomed by the local Archdiocese of Nairobi. As we heard on the first day, there is no word for stranger in Africa, once you enter a house you a member of that house—and we have certainly felt that during our time here. Indeed, we have received a comprehensive African welcome from so many people from different parts of the Continent. We have experienced meaningful and beautiful morning prayer and worship. We have greatly enjoyed the energy and vitality of African worship—where theology is truly sung and danced, where youth and women are making such a significant contribution to liturgical life. We have experienced an abundance of food, which was graciously served. We have enjoyed each other’s company, including our music and songs. We have experienced inspiring and stimulating presentations and reflections as well as excursions to sites that gave us better insight into life in Nairobi, and by extension, into Africa— even the traffic and roads became part of this reflection and facilitated even more conversations! We have been served by the excellent organization of the IACM Executive led by President, Rev Dr Andrew Gimenez Recepcion. These have been days which have been truly memorable. We have been blessed to be invited to take off our shoes and walk on the holy ground of Africa.

The report has three parts, with particular emphasis on Part 1:

1. What were significant themes and issues that emerged during the conference?
2. What were the terms, themes, and issues that seemed to require further discussion and missiological reflection?
3. What were themes, issues and realities that were missing or not adequately dealt with at the Conference?

Part 1: What were the significant themes and issues that emerged during the conference?

Missiology: being at home on the frontier

During prayer on the second morning of our Conference, Sr Nenzili Mboma FMM presented the image of being on a journey. The sense of being on a journey has been felt throughout our time together. In her plenary address, Sr Loretto Okolli noted, “The journey into the culture of mission is necessarily a journey into the ‘unfamiliar.’” Panelist, Professor Bernardeth Caero Bustillos picked up on this, highlighting that our founding father of faith, Abraham (Genesis 12) leaves all his security in order to be a blessing for other peoples. Professor Therese and Dr Jim D’Orsa refer to this as Mission on the frontier—we are literally making new maps as we follow the Spirit’s lead into new ways of thinking about and experiencing God’s Mission. As Professor Caero Bustillos eloquently stated, “being on the frontier is the home of Missiology.” Adding, we need to become nomadic in our thinking, and this means being open to what is different and being open to be surprised.

The African proverb, “If you want to walk fast, walk alone; if you want to walk far, you travel together” resonated with us. I believe this was at the heart of the presentation on Friday morning from our brothers and sisters from Cochabamba in their presentation on “transdisciplinary approach to Missiology.” While drawing
from an interdisciplinary model, they drew our attention to the need to come together with others from different disciplines, with their accompanying specialized methodologies, to work on common projects. The process of working together, learning from each other, ultimately becomes transformative, as each individual team member is shaped by the other, and the team itself is shaped through the discipline of working together. This is frontier work!

The image of being a traveler on a journey was given further life in Cardinal Tagle’s captivating and moving reflection on Jesus and his disciples as being travelers into new, even enemy territory (read: frontier). Cardinal Tagle challenged us to think about locating the wells where people are going. If they are not coming to our wells, we must go in search of theirs.

We became conscious out of Vatican II that we are a pilgrim people journeying together, but in this conference we have acknowledged another reality, that we are part of a bigger human family of pilgrims, we are co-pilgrims with the Other, journeying towards God. As one member put it, we are also on a journey to the world, and “we are just starting to learn to talk about this.” The notion of Inter-Gentes asked the question, can we, the whole human family journey together towards God?

**Inter-Gentes: A Paradigm for Engaging in Mission**

The Conference theme of Missio Inter-Gentes: Challenges and Opportunities, was powerfully introduced at the first plenary by Professor Jonathan Tan, and the theme gathered momentum throughout our days, coming to a climax when Cardinal Tagle’s final words to our Association were of gratitude and encouragement to IACM for choosing this theme, and that he will take his words of encouragement on Inter-Gentes to the deliberations on the final version of the New Evangelization document.

Professor Tan’s context of Asia, provided a lens for the conference into the theme. We were reminded that Asia represents two-thirds of the world’s population, that the Church has been there since the first Christian millennia. Professor Tan outlined several gifts of Asian missionary activity that we should consider:

- The great religions are here to stay.
- That rather than see other religions as competitors, we see them as allies in our shared mission of working towards the Kingdom of God.
- That we have much to learn from our Reign of God co-collaborators.
- That the Asian experience of orthopathos is a significant contribution to our understanding of Mission.

Professor Tan highlighted that Inter-Gentes serves to redefine the relationship between sending-receiving model towards a global Christianity model. The traditional sending-receiving model has ended. We recognize that due to globalization the ground has shifted, and it has happened quickly. We must proceed in the spirit and reality of Inter-Gentes that recognizes that each evangelizes the other. As Cardinal Tagle commented: “No one is purely beggar; no one is exclusively giver. Both have something to give and something to receive.”

We have noted that Mission is multi-directional, with traditional geographical boundaries almost rendered irrelevant in our times. Communication and information technology has contributed significantly to demolishing geographic boundaries. Our language also reflects the change in sending-receiving model. We have moved away from “crosscultural” to “intercultural” and some of us into “transcultural.” This language reflects our new global reality.

Professor Tan introduced a three-fold Missiological framework of orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos. Orthodoxy situates the Gospel within the universality of God’s reign, that is, missio Dei is the priority. Orthopraxis enables the gospel to engage with the diversity of religions in a spirit of interreligious hospitality. Orthopathos is inspired by divine empathy and solidarity with human suffering and brokenness.

The significance of orthopathos cannot be understated, with one panelist suggesting a reversal of order, commence with orthopathos, then to orthopraxis leading to orthodoxy. As we are aware, pastoral action (praxis) usually precedes pastoral reflection (orthodoxy). The introduction of orthopathos takes this an important step further, namely, what is our own disposition before engaging in pastoral action, what is the
worldview, assumptions, attitudes that we bring to our praxis? Another member put it, “*Missio Inter-Gentes* must begin with our own interior reflection. We must review and change out-of-date structures of thinking within ourselves.” As one member put it, the Christian gospel is always alien to others without orthopathos.

The notion of *Missio Ad Gentes* has not been superseded. The notion of *Missio Inter-Gentes* is a complementary understanding. *Inter-Gentes* (“from among and with the people”) reminds us of the importance of our relational reality. This reflects the heart of the paradigm shift of engaging in mission. We no longer think of doing something “to” the Other. It must always be invitational, nonviolent, relational - with the Other.

*The Power of Biblical & Personal Narrative*

The Conference was blessed by the presence and presentation of Cardinal Tagle. His presentation on the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-22) was compelling. Cardinal Tagle sought to investigate the contribution of *Missio Inter-Gentes* to the New Evangelization, and how directions from the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization can enrich *Missio Inter-Gentes*. As he put it, bring them into dialogue with each other, and purify and enrich each other.

Cardinal Tagle, witnessed to the power of narrative, and in particular, the potency of biblical narrative to touch our lives. Throughout his reflection, Cardinal Tagle interspersed his own stories, the stories of others, particularly the poor and those experiencing loss, and feeling lost. His stories served to challenge the listener to reflect on their lives, their actions, and their need for ongoing conversion. His own narrative witnessed to the power of ordinary life. In short, he spoke about the primacy of the human person, and that orthopathos reminds us of our common humanity, and our need to be open to receiving the gifts of the Other and being able to share our gifts with them.

The Gospel of St John has resourced us this week. We learnt that in John, the dominant theme is discipleship, and that being a disciple is being a lifelong learner from Jesus. The function of a disciple is to learn, it is not to preach. The disciples in John are commissioned only after having received the resurrection. In John 15, Jesus invites the disciples to love one another. In short we are called to transform ourselves, and this can only occur through loving relationships with others. This love is will be our witness. The Healing and Reconciliation sub-theme also pondered other parts of John’s Gospel, including 8:1-11, and Chapter 20 contrasting Magdala’s healing (“no touch”) with Thomas’ (“touch”).

*Dialogue*

Dialogue, in its many manifestations and understandings, (“conversation,” “sharing”) is an essential notion for *Missio Inter-Gentes*. We remind ourselves that terms connote different meanings to different people in different contexts. However, it is understood that dialogue lies at the heart of *Missio Inter-Gentes*. One workshop presenter suggested that dialogue is a religious praxis, and it is to be celebrated. Dialogue is not limited to being only an exchange of ideas. It is multidimensional and needs to be inclusive of gendre, culture, economy, politics, ecology, the very issues of human and ecological survival. In the presentation on “*Missio Inter-Gentes* and Interreligious Dialogue,” Fr Edgar Javier proposed dialogue as the solution to violence that is done in the name of religion. Unpacking this further, Fr Javier stated, “Knowing the Other is good, experiencing is better, loving is best;” adding “It’s not that easy to love the Other.”

*Global Religious Landscape*

The new global religious landscape was a solid theme within the conference. Issues of multiple religious identities and belonging was named and could be a source of further reflection. Newly emerging cultures was named, and again is an area that we will need to pay attention to. There was much use of terms like secularization, secularism, secularity, and pluralism, that we could have benefited with clearer understandings. Nevertheless, what is clear is that this new landscape makes demands on all of us to be a source of hospitality to the Other. A few years back, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks made the point that the Pope was the only one in the position to provide a “religious space” where people can come together around the great human issues of our time. One workshop presentation noted the Pope’s title, *Pontifex maximus*, means supreme bridge builder. Fr
Javier’s presentation on Interreligious Dialogue named some of the skills required for dialogue that builds bridges between peoples and their lives. The African value and capacity for community and community building was named in Sr Okoli’s plenary address and was evident throughout the conference. It was suggested that our academic discourse is sharpest and most fruitful when it emerges out of commitment and involvement in the real lives of God’s people. The implications for Missiology, and for each of us is how are we practicing this in our local situations.

**Human Migration**

It is not surprising that the needs of migrants surfaced regularly during the conference, with there being currently over 27 million forced migrants in the world. Nevertheless, rather than being perceived as objects of mission, it was noted that migrants can be effective agents of mission between peoples.

One workshop raised the idea of the missionary as migrant and as stranger, and drew on the criteria for the Last Judgment as established by Jesus, “I was a stranger.” It was raised at the last IAMS Assembly whether the place of migration in mission is simply a fad, or is it likely to have an ongoing place in missiological work. From what surfaced from our conference I think human migration is likely to be quite central to Missiology for the foreseeable future.

**Other areas**

Ecology surfaced at different times throughout the Conference. The Interreligious Encounter sub-theme noted that *Inter-Gentes* is Ortho-cosmic, meaning all religions will care for Mother Earth. This also suggests an approach that is broader than an anthropocentric model. Indigenous Spiritualties was named as containing much that could assist us here. My sense is we are on the cusp of new insights into the need to make this a higher priority, and soon.

The issue of modern communication technologies, and the new culture of digital natives, surfaced at different times during the week. The new technologies were named as the equivalent of the “new wells,” where people gather “virtually.” Like ecology, I sense this issue is one that will increasingly exercise our attention and our resources, and that its reach is far greater than the so-called digital natives.

**Experiencing Missio Inter-Gentes among ourselves**

I would like to conclude Part 1, with some observations on our experience of participating in this gathering. I believe we have actually experienced Missio Inter-Gentes among ourselves. We have practiced orthopathos, through deep listening to the experiences and insights of others. This has been difficult and tiring work at times (with English not being main language for many, and with a variety of different accents to understand!), but we have done this well, and thereby gained direct field experience of Missio Inter-Gentes.

The sub-theme groups have been excellent occasions for testing out our thinking, receiving feedback from others with different experiences and worldviews. This practice of dynamic conversation has enabled greater interiority to develop, and perhaps pointed to gaps or blindspots that we had not noticed before. We have been challenged to identify what we react to, what stirs us, what even annoys us, because it is often through paying attention to sources of irritation that we gain greater insight into our self.

In the Mission Education and Formation plenary discussion the question, “Who forms the formators?” was raised. I think this question could be asked of ourselves – who is forming us? The deep experience of Missio Inter-Gentes among ourselves this week has been a powerful formative and possibly transformative experience for many. One member asked me early on, “How do we gather the stories and experiences of missionaries in the field?” Again, the question could also be asked of ourselves, “How have we listened to the stories and experiences of each other during the week? What impact has our own storytelling had on us? What did we learn about ourselves in telling our stories and listening to others? What has been your experience of God through the narrative experiences you have participated in this week? We could echo the sentiments of Cardinal Tagle when in responding in an interview, he was surprised by the strength of what he said, and later asked himself, “Did I really say that? Do I really believe that?”
During the Conference a number of terms emerged—both in the plenaries and in the workshops—that require further reflection.

- Theology of culture and theologies of religion requires ongoing work.
- The issue of hospitality to migrants and refugees for the Church is a huge challenge and opportunity. We need to become a listening Church and a welcoming community, specially to the lost and the alienated.
- Fuller discussion on the relationship between Mission Ad Gentes and Missio Inter-Gentes. What is the relationship? Is it a paradigm shift? What is the relationship to the New Evangelization? What is the relationship of Mission Inter-Gentes to the Great Commission? As Cardinal Tagle asked, What went wrong with the old evangelization? What has grown old?
- With the Reign of God being at the heart of missio Dei, and therefore always needing to be the focus of our work in mission, and our need to work with all people of good will to this purpose, will we be able to consider a further development of our model of engaging and living mission to Missio Trans-Gentes. How are we all transformed/changed through working with others and witnessing to such missionary activity?

The following is humbly offered knowing that we only have limited time, and we always have to make questions of judgment. These are offered simply to keep us mindful of possibilities for the future:

- Get a handle on the impact of globalization on all our societies. Discussion on political and economic situation has been largely absent. Need for social analysis.
- As Misisology is interdisciplinary, we could engage with people from different academic backgrounds. The presence of such input could add a rich layer to our Conference.
- Research Methodologies. While surfacing at different times, it was strongly recommended in the Theologico-missiological foundation sub-theme group that future Conferences should give attention to this. We can learn from each other’s methodologies and also from methodologies from other different disciplines.
- The participation of people from different religious traditions could have added another dimension to the Conference, particularly given the theme of Missio Inter-Gentes.

**Conclusion**

Overall, we have experienced an extremely successful IACM General Assembly & Conference. We have worked hard, and lived in close quarters for most of the time, yet I believe we have experienced times of great inspiration – even joy. The multiple opportunities for reflection, for deep conversation and sharing, have enabled us to truly experience among ourselves the fruits of Missio Inter-Gentes. Our thanks go to all those who have made this Fifth General Assembly possible, especially our president, Rev Dr Andrew Gimenez Recepcion and the 2009-2013 Executive. May IACM continue to receive abundant blessings. We look forward to meeting again.

Gerard Goldman
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