

"Washing the feet of the poor"

The Eucharist and the priesthood

Today I stand in front of you to share about a topic that is so dear to my heart: the connection between Jesus in the Eucharist, Jesus in the poor and Jesus in the priesthood.

Three distinctive forms of His presence that are deeply related to each other and interconnected.

I am going to share about this topic, from my experience as a missionary in Asia for the past 21 years. I am not a theologian, I am not a teacher or lecturer, I am a simple parish priest in a poor community, among the many, in Camarin, Caloocan city. I have been working and living among the urban poor for over two decades and it is from that perspective of the daily life of our Church among the poor that I want to direct my sharing, hoping to share some of the inspiration, love and commitment to the Lord that I have seen and experienced among the poor in this blessed land of Asia.

1- Jesus in the Eucharist

Four years ago I had an epiphany, a moment of deep spiritual realization about the Eucharist when I had to rush back to Argentina, my country, to take care of my mother who was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. In her condition I had to render her all the services that a care giver gives to her patient. One morning I was bathing my mom and I had to kneel down to scrub her feet, and it was in that particular moment that I had the deep realization that WASHING THE FEET IS NOT PRIMARILY AN ACT OF SERVILE DUTY BUT AN ACT OF DEEP, ALMOST SACRAMENTAL LOVE. That morning made me realize that "washing the feet" defines the Eucharist in the deeper sense that Jesus gave it on the Last Supper. Touching mercifully the suffering flesh is not just the action of a salaried servant in ancient middle east, but it is also the loved charged action of so many sons and daughters towards their parents, of so many husbands towards their ailing wife of so many mother to their disabled children...it is an action generated by love and compassion where both the one giving it and receiving it feel a deep connection of love.

Jesus in the Eucharist makes us feel important, loved, cared. He kneels again and again in front of each and everyone of us to touch our misery with his compassion and mercy.

When I first arrived to the Philippines I had the impression that the country had an "eucharistic overdose" and that hyper sacramentalism was a form of lack of spirituality...with the past of the years, and the experience living with the poor I came to realize that the love of the people for the Eucharist, and their desire to have Mass in any possible occasion (

birthdays, anniversaries, opening of schools year, funerals, etc as well as in all possible places: malls, public offices, universities, streets, markets, etc) is a deep cry asking the loving presence of Jesus to be present, bless and protect His people in every situation. This is in the language of Pope Francis "spirituality of the people", real spirituality in the highest sense of the word.

This understanding of the Eucharist as an action of love that touches and serves at the same time is an inspiration for me as a priest, as well and foremost as a Christian.

As a Christian, in every Eucharist I feel the loving touch of Jesus touching me where I am most fragile, in the darkest and dirtiest spots of my life. Reaching there not with condemnation or judgment but with pure love.

As a priest I realize that my main mission during the Eucharist is in whatever situation or place where I found myself celebrating the Mass, I have to be an instrument of the Mercy of Jesus towards all, but specially towards those who are broken, dirty and in pain.

As a pastor then I realize the powerful pastoral implication of this: living the preferential option for the poor means for me making the Eucharist available to people in all their sinfulness and brokenness, poverty and alienation, making them feel JESUS FOR THEM every time that the Mass is celebrated and the Lord again kneels to wash and touch, to clean and love.

2- Jesus in the poor

One of most profound experiences of the Lord I have always had is through the contact with the deep faith of the simple people in the poor slums of Metro Manila, as well as in other parts of the country. The faith of the poor have always touched me deeply, as so many times we read in the Gospel the Lord was deeply touched but the simple yet profound uncomplicated and all trusting faith of the little ones. It is that strong faith that is both enriched by the Eucharist and at the same time builds up the Church.

I would like to share two experiences I had that deeply touched me and made me realize the truth of the teaching that "the Church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church".

The first one I have experienced doing missionary work in a remote mountainous community in the highlands of La Union among the people of the Kankanaey tribe.

When I started visiting that place as a response to the request of the Bishop of the place for a priest to celebrate the Mass in the highland communities that were left without assistance since the death of the late parish priest, I was totally surprised and edified to know that in spite of the lack of priests, the lay ministers would walk every Sunday morning for five hours down the mountains to the parish church to get the ciborium with the Holy Eucharist, and then will walk back for another 5 hours up the mountain to give Holy Communion to the community that were gathered waiting for their return...ten hours of hard walk up and down the mountains every Sunday just to give communion to the spiritually hungry people that

were waiting for it...THE EUCHARIST MAKES THE CHURCH,it was Jesus and His Words and Body that kept that people anchored strongly in their catholic faith.

The commitment and holiness of those simple yet great men of faith that were the lay ministers of the kankanaey people made me realize how true also it is that THE CHURCH MAKES THE EUCHARIST.

The second experience is closer in time and place, it just started few months ago and is still going on until now. In my parish community we are building up a dialysis center for the poor. Through our parish clinic we came to realize that there are so many poor patients suffering from kidney diseases in need of dialysis and that cant access to it for financial reasons and so we decided,trusting in Divine Providence to build the first such center in the country run by a parish. Being an urban poor community we have a lot of financial challenges...knowing this our extraordinary ministers of the Holy Communion decided to do "bayanihan" a Filipino term that perfectly describes the greatness and genius of the filipino people and that basically can be translated as "a community that works",it is the free giving of time as a community to do voluntary work that will be for the community,especially for those who need it most: the poor. That work allowed my parish to save almost forty percent of the cost of the construction,and thus the building is coming up, with the hard work of this simple men that work hard, volunteer hard and serve the Lord with vigor and enthusiasm. Those hands hardened by strong manual work ARE THE BEST HANDS TO HAND THE BODY OF CHRIST TO THE COMMUNITY. It is not only their liturgical service to the Eucharist that builds the Church but also their Eucharistic work in the construction of the dialysis center that puts Christ right in the midst of poverty as a consoling and healing presence.

3- Jesus through the presence of the priest

I would like to meditate for a while in the twofold meaning of PRESENCE.

For us priests being in His presence makes all things possible,especially the most difficult of all priestly duties: the duty of keeping our words and remaining faithful to Him.

I still can remember a simple yet so powerful talk given to the clergy of manila by the late cardinal Jaime Sin. He told us gathered for a meeting in his palace: " if you are very busy,please be sure to pray at least for an hour in front of the Blessed Sacrament, but if you really are super busy,so that you have not even time to stop for a second....THEN YOU NEED TO PRAY FOR TWO HOURS AT LEAST".

As years passed by I realized that the Cardinal was not joking at all. If I want to persevere I need to be in His presence. I need to hear from Him, to give the Lord a chance to embrace me and give meaning to my days, I need to ask him what to say in my homilies, what to do as a pastor, what solution to the problem presented to me, how to console this or that person, how to forgive a brother priest,or how to accept a difficult obedience to my Bishop. If it is Not for Him, for the time spent in His HOLY PRESENCE, ministry will become just a job and fidelity just "keeping the routine".

When I was in south korea during the year 2006 I had a hard time adjusting to the climate, the culture and the language. For all missionaries the first year in mission is always the hardest. After a semester of struggle with the korean language I went home once after school so tired and burdened and hopeless that I was drowning in deep sadness. I went out after an early dinner and walked just to be all by myself, i happened to pass in front of a catholic Church and I felt a deep need to go inside to pray. The door was closed and so i started in desperation to knock at the door until an old man, the care taker, came and talk to me....but we could not understand each other...he saw in my face the desperation and so he opened the door of the parish and let me in...I cried for an hour,so hard as I never had before and poured in front of Jesus in the tabernacle all my frustrations,fears, sadness...that hour changed my life forever,gave a deep sense of peace and a total conviction that "if I am with you,who will be against you". His presence made my missionary presence in that foreign land meaningful.

The second meaning of presence for a priest is TO MAKE PRESENT JESUS TO HIS PEOPLE BY THE EUCHARISTIC CELEBRATION.

In 2003 there was a forum on Church and the poor at the Ateneo de Manila University and I was invited as a panelist, I was then the parish priest of Payatas, a very poor community in Quezon City. I remember that I was asked a very simple yet very difficult question: " how can we as a Church be closer to the poor?" Confronted to that straight forward question I remember that the answer came to my heart with all simplicity and strength too: if we want a Church closer to the poor we have to and live with them and bring with us the treasure that we have, the Eucharist that is the source of all the life of the Church. When a parish is established in a poor area, the urban poor people feel both blessed and protected, chosen and favored. When the priest celebrates funerals of those who can give him a generous stipend as well ad the funeral in a shanty of those who can not give him more than a heart felt thanks, then the Church becomes the Church of the poor. When a highly populated shanty area is given Sunday Mass even if they can not gathered enough money to complete the stipend of the priest,then they feel the presence of the Church at hand and the Holy and Mighty presence of Jesus in the Eucharist in their hearts.

In my 21 years as a missionary,and 15 as a priest, I think the greatest possible way that the Lord used me at the service of the poor was by being able to celebrate Mass Sunday after Sunday,day after day in poor communities that felt thus the preferential option for the poor by means of being given attention and priority in their spiritual needs. A priest is given the deep responsibility and profound dignity of making the Lord Jesus present in the life of His people. He becomes an instrument and a bridge to bring Jesus to His people: the youth and the old, the poor and the rich alike.

After one of my last masses in Payatas, an old lady came to me and kiss my hands and told me "thank you Jesus"... I replied: "lola, I am not Jesus" and she told me: "I know that,but if you only knew how many times Jesus spoke to me during the Masses you celebrated to us..."

I was humbled and left in tears, and I only could say embracing the old woman: thank you Jesus for giving such power to poor people like me. What a source of happiness is to be in His presence, what a responsibility it is to carry His presence to the poor.