

TALK BY: Bishop J. M. ABELLA CMF to the Oblates in Japan Oct. 15, 2019 at Sacra Famiglia, Umeda.

Self-introduction

- Birth place is Spain's Catalonia region
- Arrived in Japan in 1973.
- Deaconate ordination was in Nagoya. Ordained by the late Bishop Soma.
- In 1991 I became the Provincial of Japan of the Claretians.
- At the General Assembly of the Claretians, I was elected the General Counselor and worked at the headquarters for 24 years: 12 years as the Counselor in charge of missions and after that, as the Superior General for 12 years.
- Since the Claretians are working in about 70 countries, I visited these countries several times. During these trips I was able to not only see various churches but also to come in contact with various cultures and social situations which gave me a lot to think about the mission of the Church.
- After finishing my tour of duty in Rome, I came back to Japan in 2015, became involved in parish work again and in 2016 became an auxiliary bishop of Osaka Archdiocese.

History of the past

- I will share with you not something academic but what I feel and what I have experienced.
- I Studied Theology from 1969 to 73 when the second Vatican Council just came to an end. That was also a time when the liberation theology was born. It was then that I was sent to Japan when it was starting to become a powerful capitalistic country.
- I was sent to a small church in Nagoya with 40 believers. Other priests were working as kindergarten directors. I asked myself what should I do from Monday to Saturday? Why did I come to Japan? I should have stayed back in my country. Had I been sent to Africa, South America, or the Philippines I would have been very busy. Every day I asked myself what is it to be a priest in Japan? What is evangelization all about?
- If I preach the gospel to people, bring them to the church and baptize them, I will be a big failure. When I was in Nagoya, no one was baptized.

- I was looking for a way, and I started to go to JOC (organization for "Young Christian Workers") activities. It was a place for learning. The young people whom I met there were faced with the challenges of their own lives, relationship with their peers, and the perceptions of people's feelings as they experience their own pains. Sharing people's challenges, joys and pains was a great blessing.
- The other was to go outside the church. At that time, there was a group working for human rights in connection with a country that was not economically rich. I went there to be part of it. That was also important.
- Many years ago, the Church of Japan embarked on a nationwide effort to chart its course for the next number of years. The effort was named NICE (National Incentive Convention for Evangelization). The common theme that came out of that effort was the creation of "an open Church" where people can feel welcomed and be a part of the community. I was actively involved in that effort.
- When we go "outside" the church to a group of people who are not members of the "church", our being an ordained priest becomes immaterial or not important. But what is in common is the care, respect and thoughtfulness towards people whose human dignity is being trampled. The effort to alleviate the plight of the less fortunate is not a monopoly of the Church.
- I also went to the local regional chorus group. I tried to learn from groups outside of the Church. I did not come to Japan only to pray and meditate. I felt that I wasn't called to be a contemplative.

My experience and learning in Japan

- Just to say that "Everyone is welcome in the Church" is not enough.
- I think it's important to go to the place where the people are.
- How do we do the evangelization is important.
- Recruitment of Japanese vocation is important.
- I was involved in the Catholic High School Federation. More than the high school students I felt deeply indebted to the teachers of the high-school students that I met. They taught me how and what I can learn from the lives of high school students.
- I also got involved in the youth camps at the Hirakata Church and I learned a lot not only from the young people attending the camps but also from the organizers. People in many ways grow as Christians not through lectures but by engaging themselves in such

activities, and listening to the questions being asked by participants of those activities. I leaned as to how the adults reply to the questions asked by the children.

- The encounter with people living and working in Kamagasaki was also important. When I joined the patrol every week at night with priests, religious and Christians I became aware of a new reality that I didn't pay much attention to. The impressive words I heard from some Christians in that group was "I am a child of God; I eat 3 times; I have a place to sleep. In Kamagasaki the same child of God; cannot eat 3 times; no place to stay at night".
- There are such people in the Japanese society. We should pay more attention to the needs of those people and it is important to understand the messages that come from them. Under these circumstances, I was made to think about what mission is.

About the mission of Japan

What is mission?

1 Live the Gospel where you are sent:

- Whether you are in a kindergarten, a parish big or a small, a country, or a city, it is really important for you to live the gospel and faith and to be a witness to that.
- To make the other person feel that faith is important. When I am able to make the other person feel about the importance of faith, I think it is evangelization.

2. Engage with people:

- I think that being involved with people is the basis for mission. How and what type of a bridge you build to get involved?
 - It is a joy to interact with people although there are barriers we have to overcome to realize our goal. Anyway, what is important is to be involved.

3 Walk with the Christian Community:

- Whether parish or diocese to walk with a Japanese church is a living testimony.
- Since Japanese churches are very small in number, there is a tendency to be hard or exacting on each other. That is a great hindrance to the mission.

4 Keep searching for new ways:

- The importance of the role of missionaries cannot be overemphasized. Always look for new ways for evangelization. Don't find excuses. I think it is important to look for new ways of evangelization.

- Don't look for excuse such as: I feel tired, I wonder if this will work, etc. There is this temptation. When new proposals are made, there is the temptation to shoot them down because "we have tried them before." Don't give up. Always look for new ways, new roads.

What the Synod on Religious and Consecrated people expect from us: (a unique contribution of new evangelization)

1 Be a witness of the importance of God in people's lives.

- Be a living witness that God is important in people's lives
- Be a living witness of the gospel in the place where we are sent.

2 Be a witness that we are all interdependent.

- In today's society, we are really exposed to various forms of division and individualism.

- In this modern society, through your consecrated life in a community, be a living witness that we are all mutually dependent on each other, person to person, country to country, groups by group.

- Community life is important. It does not mean everyone in the community lives in the same place from morning to night. Compared to the past the situation has changed and the way of living together has also changed. I don't say it's good now. In the past, it was important to be together.

- Community life is not only being together under one roof, what is important is that we really LIVE together and SHARE Life together.

- Occasionally, there are times when you have to live on your own for pastoral reasons, or for whatever reason. But it is important to be together once a week, pray together, discern together, and celebrate that you are brothers together. Through community planning, project life you clearly express your commitment as a community, and do it. That is important.

- Our community life is one missionary word. I'm happy to be with you without saying anything.

3 Get ready to go to the forefront of evangelization.

- Religious make vows. They are made free. Therefore, always be ready to go out to the forefront of the gospel.

The forefront of evangelization

1 Geographical front

- Go to places like Nepal or Mongolia where the gospel has not yet been preached.

2 Cultural front

- Now, we have new challenges because modern society has evolved drastically bringing scientific progress, various ideas, civilization changes, etc. Be prepared to enter such conversations with modern society intelligently and responsibly.
- Present believers are affected by new ways of cultural values, new ways of looking at material things, etc. We must be prepared to address the new challenges that will come out from the interactions.

3 Social front

- Go to the poor, alienated, discriminated, and excluded.
- The Pope told us the Superior Generals and Provincials: When it comes to giving assignments, we give priority to filling up posts in the high places like executive of the board, principals, heads of institutions, etc. and the works with the poor and marginalized get the last attention and is filled by people who are not fitted for the job. It should be the other way around. It is wrong to assign people to our work with the poor and the marginalized if they are not fitted for the job. People who go to such places don't last long unless they are spiritually solid. Examine your community priority in making assignments. Where are we sending our most capable members?

History of Japanese church

- The basic policy of the National Incentive Convention for Evangelization (NICE) has proposed two priorities for the local churches to work on, namely: a) to invite people who are not yet part of the fold to the common Eucharistic Table that we share; b) we should prepare the grounds for the seeds of the Gospel to grow especially in places that are not yet touched by the gospel.
- When we try to make efforts on this, we become aware of an important problem: the gap between faith and life. Unless we bridge the gap between faith and everyday life then our efforts are futile. The Gospel is always our guide in every effort that we make.

- Thus, we want to emphasize the three pillars of evangelization in the Japanese context: the church that walks together with society, faith that is brought up through life, and parish that preaches and lives the gospel.

About FORMATION

Christian Formation

- I feel that the training of Japanese believers is inward-looking. What really are the things that Christians can do and not do? For example, we need clearer guidelines about para-liturgical services that can be done by Christians or whether taking communion outside the church can be done or not by Christians, etc. It is sad to note that sometimes Christians are relegated to tasks like lighting candles on the altar before mass!

- What really is important? When I was thinking about the formation of believers, what I came up with was a lecture. Liturgy, Bible and Catechism courses. All of these are important to deepen our understanding of the faith. We cannot ignore the things that matter most.

Faith should be the source of our joy and not a burden. I like to use the expression "the joy of faith."

For the awareness that it was good to have faith

1 Review

- We should be instruments to help people review or reflect on the meaning of their faith.

2 Sharing

- Encourage and affirm each other in their faith-life.
- Some people don't like sharing. The medicine for the so-called "sharing allergy" is just one - share.
 - Guide and help people to develop a healthy form of discussion or sharing. Some people cannot stop talking when they feel they have many things to share, etc.
 - Faith will not grow if we do not create an atmosphere for it to grow.

Believers who can say that they are happy to have embraced the FAITH

- I want to raise believers who can talk about their faith. They must be accompanied not only through lectures. It's hard to explain that it was really good to have faith. We should be patient and help them.
- The deepest form of spirituality is for them to experience the joy of believing, the joy of faith. Deepening spirituality is important. Formation is also important. What really is Christian formation? It is when they are able to express their own faith in their own words.

Focus on evangelization

- It is ironic that people often want to make statutes (or rules and regulations) and spend long hours in making them. Once the statutes are made, everyone feels satisfied and secure. However, it is also ironic that after the statutes are made, people forget about them.
- During church bazaars, there is usually a lively discussion about the things to be done such as whether to sell soba or sushi, etc. However, when the discussion is about preaching the gospel especially in their immediate communities, it is usually difficult to get opinions. It is not that they don't want to preach the gospel, but they don't know what to say and how to say.
- Create an atmosphere where people can feel comfortable to share their ideas and always find the right questions to ask.
- At the meeting we say try to talk to 3 people for 10 minutes. When three people talk, something comes out. After that, are you embarrassed to say your own opinion? This is easier to get out. Rather than thinking about this, we talked about this. Something is necessary.
- Identification is important. In order to be able to identify well, it is not possible to identify unless the criteria for identification are clear. The standard is the gospel, the teachings of the church, parish policy. That is the standard of identification. Based on that, what to do.
- Each church has to make a certain vision. Half page is good. It doesn't have to be a big deal. What do you want to take care of, and why do you want to take care of has to be decided. What you do yourself and how you contribute etc. these are something concrete that have to be given importance.

About the Religious Congregations

With the marginalized

- It's important that any Province or Delegation gets involved in the activities to help the poor, abused and marginalized people. The involvement is not as a hobby of a person but as a Province it is important. Such brothers always ask us questions that are important.
- For example, the Claretians were based in Kamagasaki for a while. There I was camping out with a priest and two brothers and homeless people. I returned to my religious community once a week for two days. It was a great stimulus for them to humbly share their feelings.
- Support and affirm each other for whatever work you are doing like kindergarten, parish, in charge of formation, etc.

The charism of the Congregation

- The congregation is not simply in the business of providing manpower where it is needed. We all have received a special charism from the Holy Spirit as a congregation and we live that charism in the places where we are sent, be it in a parish, kindergarten, etc. Think of your charism as a necessary tool or guide for your ministry.
- As religious, we are recipients of the particular charism of our congregation. However, whether we are Oblates or Claretians, our charisms may vary but we are doing the same work. It is not a question of which congregation is doing greater or lesser work for the Church. What is important is a positive attitude, not to be afraid to continue searching for the better good, not to be satisfied with what is less and mediocre, etc.

Introduction of a new book

- Interview of Pope Francis on "Consecration Life". This book is very interesting and soon will be out in Japanese. I recommend it because it's short. It will become the power of vocation.





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