

NCEA Mass - Homily Reflections

To Dr. Michael Guerra, President of the NCEA, go my thanks for the invitation to be with you this afternoon. I am delighted at the presence of Bishop Martin Lohmuller, my first pastor after ordination. Bishop Lohmuller helped me to learn how important Catholic education is, and often I have recalled how driving the school bus on a rainy day gave me great sympathy for the teachers in similar situations.

The first reading, from the third chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, reminds us of a gloomy yet joy-filled period in the early life of the infant Church. The Apostles were exultant over the Resurrection of the Lord, and still unhappy about the final chapter of his life. How many of you saw The Passion of the Christ last year? You know why there was sadness, and you know why there was joy.

Several weeks ago a number of African bishops came to concelebrate with me in Baltimore. Their presence evoked the memory of the days eleven years ago when the first Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa was held in Rome. The Synod for Africa began as the sad news poured in from Rwanda, with many of the bishops there slaughtered in the uprising with their people.

Just this week, the Baltimore Sunpublished an article by Jefferson Price, who served overseas for many years. Mr. Price is traveling through Africa with a group from Catholic Relief Services, a Baltimore-based organization that is the voice of the Catholic Church for situations of need in some 90 countries. He wrote, "These people ... are desperately impoverished. Every chore of every day is a challenge, sometimes fraught with danger to their health. This applies to the simplest chores that we perform without a second thought. For they have no electricity, no running water, not stove, no refrigerator, no air conditioning - only the most primitive tools to work with, never enough food and usually no adequate schools or health care facilities."

That sad news from Rwanda had its echo in the Synod Hall, as people from all over Africa reflected on the challenges to the people of that continent: wars, famine, disease (malaria and HIV/AIDS), political turmoil and instability. But as our discussions continued we came to realize, especially in the small group discussions,

that the Church, the Catholic Church, was the greatest force for good in the region. It was the Church which provided the schools which were educating children, boys and girls, teaching them the skills and the virtues for living and governance. The Church ran the dispensaries and hospitals which treated the ill in the name of Jesus.

Above all, the Church provided for the preaching of the Gospel, which called for a transformation of life and in the Sacraments, offered the means of grace needed for this transformation to be lived out.

They looked to the industrialized nations both as a source of some of the evils on the continent and as a source for help to move to a new plateau of health and vitality.

It was an education for me to learn how Africa had become a dumping ground for both moral (pornography) and physical (chemical by-products of manufacturing) refuse from the Northern Hemisphere.

It was also illuminating to hear some of the effects of the external debt situation plaguing some countries, and of the governmental corruption which must be ended before debt problems could be eased effectively. In addition, the need for dialogue with other Christian Churches, and with other religions, including the native animists and the rapidly growing Muslims, was affirmed.

To my new friends from Africa I explained how the Church is one voice among many in our country and how, in a democracy, we seek to make our voice heard in the public policy debate. It is a grace for us that these bishops come to articulate to our Catholic Relief Services and to policy makers of our nation the urgent need for assistance from the United States to African nations