

Reflections from the National Conference of Missionaries of Mercy
St. Meinrad Archabbey
August 30th – September 2nd 2021
By Fr. Bernard Olszewski

I believe that the importance/impact of the national meeting of the Missionaries of Mercy in the context of Cross Catholic Outreach and its mission can be understood on two separate yet interconnected levels – the personal and the professional. As an individual Missionary of Mercy each of us enjoyed a unique experience through the formal presentations, the informal exchange of reactions, experiences, and ideas, and the liturgical celebrations of each day. Each of us processed the information and the experience in a uniquely personal manner. However, since this was a communal experience, we were also privileged to experience this together on two levels – that of a Missionary of Mercy and an Outreach Preacher whose work, by its nature, is a call to mercy and compassion.

The formal presentations of the ongoing formation aspect of the conference included:

1. Bishop Franz-Peter Tebartz van Elst, Undersecretary for Catechesis in the Dicastery for New Evangelization, under whose auspices the work of the Missionaries of Mercy is housed. The Bishop's theme was "How Faith Can Create a Merciful Heart – Wisdom, Ways and Works of Sacramental Catechesis." The Bishop gave three talks to develop his thoughts and ideas fundamentally making the link between the sacramental life of the Church with the ideas of mercy and faith.

It is worth noting that the Bishop specifically mentioned that the American Missionaries of Mercy are the only national group which has taken measures to continue the discussion as a body as had been outlined as the hope for each country by the Dicastery for New Evangelization.

2. Sister Normal Pimental, MJ was the presenter on the second day and emphasized the concrete manifestation of mercy through her work with undocumented migrants at the southern border of the US. One of the most powerful aspects of her most powerful presentation was the fact that she never once made it a political statement. She spoke from the heart and the gospel without ever once making comment on the political dimension of the situation – even while specifically speaking about the governmental policies which existentially impact so strongly on the lives of those affected by those policies. It was a wonderful lesson in presenting gospel values.
3. Fr. Anthony McLaughlin, a priest of the Diocese of Lexington, was the presenter for the third topic – the canonical aspects of the work of the Missionaries of Mercy. It was an excellent, thorough, and clear presentation of the canons related to the sacrament of reconciliation and how the faculties granted to Missionaries of Mercy should be

understood and implemented. He placed it within the context of the introductory canons concerning the manner in which the law is to be understood and applied and I am sure that for many of those present it was the first time that a canonical presentation was appreciated. Not only is Fr. McLaughlin an excellent presenter with a good sense of humor but he retains his Irish brogue – born in Belfast – and so is a delight to listen to as well.

One interesting background factoid about Fr. McLaughlin is that he came to the US from Northern Ireland to be incardinated into the Diocese of Tyler, TX and so obviously is well acquainted with Bishop Strickland. He transferred to the Diocese of Lexington some years ago and might hopefully be another voice in the ear of Bishop John Stowe in the pursuit of his letter of endorsement.

4. The final presentation revolved around a survey conducted by Fr. Roger Landry, a Missionary of Mercy from the Diocese of Fall River and currently the delegate to the UN from the USCCB. He conducted a rather extensive online survey of Catholics and their ideas/impressions/experiences with the sacrament of reconciliation. He and Fr. David Caron presented the findings and led the discussions about the results. There were many honest, heartfelt responses and the survey provided a nice insight into the hearts of ordinary Catholics and their encounter with Christ in the sacrament.

Because I can speak only to my own personal response to what was experienced I offer the following observations from my perspective alone:

1. While there were other priests from the same diocese or perhaps state the five of us from Cross Catholic Outreach were the only ones who were part of a cohesive group with a common experience. When we shared in small groups and then brought it to the larger group many of the observations were in the distinct context of our itinerant preaching ministry. The presence of CCO and our work was a tangible reality in the group. It was fundamentally a good PR presence even though we were asked not to bring business cards or self-promotion materials. CCO was a presence simply because of our shared experience.
2. This was an excellent refresher as to the very specific and unique aspect of the vocation of Missionary of Mercy as envisioned by Pope Francis. In our previous meetings both in Rome and in the US there was never an actual “training” in sacramental/penal law. This meeting provided that missing component.
3. While this was an opportunity to network with other Missionaries of Mercy from across the US it was also an excellent opportunity for us to bond again as OPs and share our experiences, catch up on each others’ lives, and provide that fraternal support which we have not been able to do since before the restrictions of the pandemic.

4. It was a wonderful opportunity to professionally network with priests across the US who were unfamiliar with CCO and our work. Without being obnoxious or pushy, questions naturally arose as to what we do and how we do it and so it was a nice opportunity to enlighten. I sat in the small groups with the rector of the college-seminary in Indianapolis and think that I was able to secure an opportunity for a seminary presentation. He, in turn, directed me to one of the Benedictines who is a formation director at the seminary at Saint Meinrad and we spoke briefly of a possible seminary visit to the major seminary at Saint Meinrad.
5. It was also wonderful to share in the communal liturgical celebrations – the liturgical prayers of the Divine Office as well as the celebration of the eucharist each day. Bishop Franz-Peter was celebrant/homilist for two of the liturgies and the concluding liturgy was presided over by the Archbishop of Indianapolis.
6. I believe that the whole experience for each of us and for all of us served to strengthen our understanding of this ministry as well as challenge us to ponder how we may more fully incorporate this aspect of our priestly lives into the preaching ministry of our work as Outreach Priests.
7. This also causes me to think that there must be some way of better incorporating this aspect of our priestly lives into the “marketing” of us to parishes. I met one priest, a religious, who is a part-time preacher for Unbound but he was the only one. We are unique in what we can bring to a parish in terms of sacramental opportunity and I believe that there must be some way in which we could utilize that fact when contacting parishes for future opportunities – especially in the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent.
8. While the overall theme of the meeting was to develop a deeper understanding of the theological dimensions and practical applications of the ministry of the Missionaries of Mercy I believe there was also an implicit spiritual subtext which linked the presentations as well as the discussions. In his first talk Bishop Franz-Peter invoked the phrase from the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, later employed in the writings of Cardinal St. John Henry Newman – **cor ad cor loquitur** – as the language of mercy. It is the heart of one human person speaking directly and profoundly to the heart of another human person in a manner which asserts the fundamental dignity of every person and which should serve as the starting point of any encounter of mercy. St. Norma elaborated this theme in her presentation and her discussion of the four needed aspects of ministering to the most vulnerable of the world. I think that this particular spiritual insight is a good theological framework for the understanding of our approach of integral human development.

As I mentioned at the beginning of these observations – this is my experience of the time spent at the meeting and I am sure that each of the men has a slightly differing recollection. I would like to express my thanks for the opportunity of being able to participate in the gathering

and for the support that CCO has given us from the very first call by Pope Francis during the Jubilee Year of Mercy.

Fr. Bernard Olszewski

30 September 2021