

2019 Parish Pastoral Assembly Speech

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Heads of Ministries

Brothers and sisters in Christ

It is my privilege to serve the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. What is a candle for if it does not burn itself out? However, this parish presents a unique pastoral landscape. Why? It is located in the heart of Johor Bahru, the 2nd largest city in the country. The ranking is just a brutal description of what constitutes urban JB. Many of you present are from JB and you work here. But, there are those who are unable to attend because they need to rush back to Singapore in order to avoid the jam. Therefore, our distinct community consists of parishioners both locals as well as migrants. Our “migrants” are more economic than refugee immigrants. Our educational make-up itself reflects this unique composition—local, home, Singapore and International schooling backgrounds.

You can imagine how difficult it is to prescribe a uniform pastoral plan. We have to be more nuanced and perhaps compassionate in our approach. Admittedly, some will have to fall through the cracks simply because we do not have the resources to be that specialised or targeted. Broadly speaking, difficult though it may be, we need to have a kind of flexibility and effectiveness in our ministries and apostolates. A good example would be the conferring of the Sacrament of Confirmation for our youths, especially for those studying in Singapore and International Schools.

I have just painted a challenging portrait of the apostolic terrain, that of serving a Catholic population divided by such a simple reality as observing a conventional weekend versus an Islamic one—Saturday/Sunday vs Friday/Saturday.

Demanding as it may be, our focus for the parish is directed to AD2022. The Diocese and the Cathedral will mark a jubilee and an anniversary—Golden for Malacca Johore and Ruby for Sacred Heart. However, the celebration is supposed to begin next year and hence it will cover a period of 3 years.

Taking our cue from the 4Es of the Diocese, we would like to focus on the renewal needed to arrive well-poised for the next 50 years of the Church's evangelical mission.

Looking at the timeline we have and how we want to arrive at 2022, I would like to propose a path which reflects a profound theological truth often quoted as ***lex orandi, lex credendi***. This literally means that the ***law of praying is the law of belief***. Put in another way, ***how we pray is what we believe in***. Take a look at the Preface of the Assumption which we just celebrated. The prayer expresses our belief that Mary was assumed into heaven in order to be the beginning and the image of the Church coming to perfection and hence she is to be the sign of sure hope and comfort for us lagging pilgrims finding our way back to heaven.

If that is too heavy, have a go at another Preface. This one is for Religious.

***For in the Saints who consecrated themselves to Christ
for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven,
it is right to celebrate the wonders of your providence,
by which you call human nature back to its original holiness
and bring it to experience on this earth
the gifts you promise in the new world to come.***

Original holiness is an invitation for religious life to mirror heaven meaning that if you want to know and experience what heaven is like, just look at the religious. We know that reality is sadly often otherwise meaning that sometime when you want to experience hell, you join religious life. However, one must never be surprised because that is truly the ugliness of sin. Human nature weakened by sin does not invalidate the truth that religious life is God's gift to the world to help it remember that there is a heaven to aim for.

So, our prayer not only determine what we believe in but it also has an effect on how we live our lives which means that the maxim ***lex orandi, lex credendi*** does not end there because what we believe in must flow into our life. To be practical and not just theoretical, this principle can be expressed as ***lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi***. This means that the manner of our worship reflects what we believe in and must determine how we live our lives.

The first year, which is from now until the end of next year, we will focus on the renewal of our Liturgical orientation. This sounds frivolous but it is not. In fact, it follows what St Ignatius of Loyola in the Principle and Foundation of the Spiritual Exercises tells us: ***Man is made to praise, revere and serve God and in doing so save his soul.*** Indeed, the evangelical counsels, embraced by a religious (priest, brother or sister), embody this principle that we should seek first the Kingdom of God so that all the rest will fall in line.

However, we are afraid of sacramental rigour. Why? Because we feel that utility and functionality should rank higher than just being frivolous about the liturgy. For example, do we need to bow our heads when we hear the name of Jesus, Mary or the Trinity mentioned? This simple gesture may appear as trivial but bears testimony that we are not on equal footing with God—the divide between the Creator and the creature is infinite and hence a simple or a profound bow express this belief. ***Lex orandi, lex credendi.***

Do you know that the Roman Canon I, known as the Eucharistic Prayer I, is properly the Eucharistic Prayer of our Church—that is, of the Latin-Rite Church. Whatever language we use, Mandarin, Tamil, BM or English, we cannot run away from the reality that we belong to the Latin-Rite Church. However, from experience, many priests will avoid the EPI because it is deemed “too long”. If a prayer that is organic to the Latin-rite Church is rejected, it begs the question of our origin. We do not really know what we believe in. ***Lex orandi is lex credendi.***

Thus, paying attention to our vestments, to our vessels and to the liturgical minutiae such as a bow may feel unnecessary but in reality that is at the heart of our renewal. This exercise is not a narrow focusing of what people might call navel-gazing but rather it seeks to look towards God so that we can gain His vision for the world. ***Lex orandi*** is that closely linked to ***lex credendi*** so much so that a shallow belief is perhaps a reflexion of the failure to recognise God for who He is. It follows that when people who do not know who God is, they will place their faith in other things.

But, we have heard this: “How can you love the God whom you cannot see when you do not love the neighbour whom you can see?”. We use the neighbour as the measure of our love for God, that is, if you love your neighbour more, it means that you love God more. We equate the love we have for our neighbour as the love we have for God. However, you can also say that the communist system is predicated or established on the foundation or

basis of love for neighbour. And yet, the communists do not love God at all. Within this seemingly noble humanistic philosophy, God is the easiest person we forget.

Our culture is attracted to “activism” because it is functional and practical. A good example is feeding the poor. It is definitely more practical and you can discern the result. This mentality appreciates success in terms of achievements like having KPI (Key performance Index). Within this functional and practical matrix, God should serve us. How? By us organising our liturgy more conveniently to worship Him. It is so deceptive that in the guise of worshipping God, we are actually worshipping the gods we have made for ourselves—convenience and activism.

Only when we recognise that God at the centre of our worship, it follows that we will slowly and imperceptible change our demeanour and our outlook in life. The love of God necessarily flows in the love of our neighbours. How do we do this? Attend to the things of God. Hence, *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*. Our liturgy establishes our beliefs and grounds our missionary actions. This is how it should flow.

Soon enough you will see that the servers will be sporting newer and cleaner vestments. It cannot be that they are worshipping God but in their dressing indicate that Whom they worship is in fact not worthy of them—by dressing badly and dirtily. How can we expect people to come to Church dressed properly when our servers look shabby in their liturgical clothing? We will renew our other vestments providing us all with a feast for the eyes. In other words, our liturgy is a reflexion of heaven. If liturgy is ugly, who cares to go to heaven. Perhaps it explains why people are lukewarm. Paying attention to God’s prerogatives can only sharpen our sense of heaven and allows our encounter with God to flow into the way we look at the world.

The daily Masses will see me celebrating the saints because they are our cloud of witnesses. I hope my other two priests too will take it upon themselves to do the same. We have veiled our Blessed Sacrament because the instruction from *Redemptionis Sacramentum* prohibits the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament to be exposed without someone accompanying or worshipping the Lord. We will celebrate the feasts of our Cathedral—Dedication, Sacred Heart of Jesus, Margaret Mary Alacoque etc. We also want to promote a culture of adoration amongst our people.

Secondly, with God as our centre, we begin the renewal of our people. To avoid the activism which seemingly serves God but in the end makes us love the things of God rather than the God of things, we must make time for retreats and recollections giving space to God in our lives. This is at the heart of our renewal. Otherwise we will just remain at the so-called the level of the “things of God”. From the activities organised around God we need to enter in the space of the God of our activities. We cannot remain at functionality but enter into being enlightened by God. How many of you have made a retreat, one which is filled with silence before the Lord? How often do we participate in Eucharistic adoration? We will also put into practice the professional standards which is a reflection of the principle of justice that we are called to. Our use of resources must reflect the laity’s trust in our stewardship as well as the protection of children must be our priority. This will be the mark of 2020-2021.

Thirdly, empowered we seek to renew our structures, basically our physical space, to allow God’s house to shine out as a beacon of love and hope. Outward sign of inward grace allows us to introduce now the fourth component of this profound principle of the Church. ***Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi, lex aedificandi***. Prayer determining our belief and structuring our life has ramifications on how we construct our buildings. It is instructive that the English word “edifice” (a building) which is related to ***aedificandi*** is associated with the word “edify” meaning to instruct or improve someone morally or intellectually. Hence, the Cathedral, as an edifice should be the shining building of God attracting all men to Himself. The current experience of Notre Dame is instructive for us all. The aftermath of the burning of the Cathedral drew in all the great sponsors and advertisements but in reality the money came pouring in not from the luminaries but rather from the nonentities—the nobodies, the unknown, the poor. They recognise that God’s house is not a billboard for advertising. Our renewed and empowered people will be the backbone of our structural renewal. We will renovate the Cathedral so that the building will be the outward sign of inward grace—an edifice reflecting the beauty of the converted people.

The renovation of the Cathedral, that is, its physical renewal, will take place some time in 2021 so that the completed renovation will be part of the twin Jubilees that we commemorate. The blue print we have for the renovation is based on the drafted plan set up by Fr John Yeow with some alterations. This is especially with regard to the existing stained glass panels that are so in need of repair. There will be work for us to carry out as a community. Be that as it may, ***Laudato si*** will be a basic component of this renewal. For this, we must

put our money where our mouth is. We speak of a viable environment hence our actions must support this. We will invest in an industrial dish washing machine for our dishes and that our catering will move in the direction of zero-tolerance for single-use plastic.

You may be able to discern the trajectory, which I have marked out for us. If you are confused, let me restate what I have said so far. I want to plot a path so that we can arrive at 2022. In general our culture of achievement measures success on the basis of doing. Hence, we are comfortable discussing activities and are fearful that we may be judged from doing too little. This principle we are comfortable with, moves from doing to being. A good illustration of this principle can be observed in a covenantal relationship between a man and a woman in marriage. Does buying flower for his wife makes the man a husband? No. He can be husband in action but in reality his heart can be somewhere else. However, if he accepts that he is a husband, then buying flower is nothing but an expression of his **being** a husband. His faithfulness, his protectiveness and his providence flow from the fact that he **IS** the husband. Providing food and shelter for your children do not make you a parent. Rather you being a parent makes you provide food and shelter. In using the principle of **lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi, lex aedificandi** we are simply moving from being to doing. We are creatures and we recognise who we are and hence we worship God, believe in Him, live the way we do and build according what we believe in.

The three years ahead are focused on God, the people and the building and we must not lose sight that the fruit of the 4E encapsulates the meaning of “baptised and sent”. The task is at hand. As St Edmund Campion used to say, **“The expense is reckoned, the enterprise is begun; it is of God, it cannot be withstood. So the Faith was planted: so it must be restored”**. This is a journey that we will be making together, to the glory of God. May the Lord be praised. Thank you.

Just as an addendum:

The Family Day is coming up soon. It does not look like it but it belongs with **lex vivendi**. The law is not linear in the sense that it flows from prayer to belief to life. Instead, the law expresses at once the relationship between praying, believing, living and building. The temptation is that we can be so caught up with our functional existence, meaning that our lives revolve around our material well-being that we forget to trust that God can provide. When we care only about material progress, it does not take much for relationship to be

enslaved by this economic priority. The Family Day helps us prioritise relationships over economic requirements—God and people. We are pilgrims on a journey—indeed a pilgrim family and therefore recreation together allows our bonds to deepen so that we can help each other along the pilgrim route to heaven. I pray that you will make time for the Family Day.