

Holy Mass in Bali

A humbling experience

In the Church of St. Francis Xavier in Kuta, Bali, is a 1960s era concrete construction of near semi-circular design, with the altar on the “diameter” wall. It seats about 400 people.

In 1992, when I first visited Kuta, Sunday Masses were the vigil (7:00pm on the Saturday) with the solemn Sunday morning celebration (readings in both Indonesian and English) beginning at 8:00am and concluding at 9:50am!

Over the years - and quite a few more visits – I have seen the parish community grow, in 2004, the Mass timetable was: Saturday evening vigil at 7:00pm, Sunday Masses at 7:00am and (solemn) 9:00am, with a 6:00pm evening Mass in English for tourists.

A permanent awning now stretched from the main doors to the street boundary, under which a further 250 worshipers could be seated. If you arrived 5 minutes before Mass began (as I did) you would be seated under coconut palms, along with 100 others, at each side of the building (by the opened side doors) on plastic stools supplied by the ushers as required. Loudspeakers relayed the Mass to those outside. A new church was under construction behind the present building, which even with its overflowing seating, was filled to capacity for both Sunday morning Masses.

Back in 1992, I was keen to experience a different cultural approach to the Liturgy in a country where Catholicism is very much in the minority. Looking back, I probably took with me a slightly smug attitude, anticipating how the local church would compare with Cathedral standards in New Zealand. Any superior preconceptions were soon swept away!

Bali is, of course, a Hindu island enclave in a Muslim country. I have witnessed some of the Hindu temple ceremonies: formal temple garb (completely different from normal attire), processions, chanting choirs of monks, incense sticks galore, embroidered hangings and ceremonial umbrellas, flower offerings, booming gongs and tinkling hand bells, plus the sprinkling of ceremonial water, are all traditional elements of Hindu religious observances.

Religious belief is palpable, as can be seen daily in Bali. Morning offerings are dedicated (usually by female staff members) at the shrines prominently displayed by every hotel, restaurant, shop and stall. The offerings include symbolic food, flowers, incense sticks, sprinkling of water and prayers. Your friendly barman may turn up in full temple dress or sarong, tunic and hat, with rice grains pasted to his temple, because his Temple is celebrating a special local festival that day (his hours are rostered so that he can attend).



Figure 1. St. Xavier's parish today (2017).

In such an environment, the Roman Liturgy has no need of “inculturation”; its liturgical expressions of religious devotional practice are already fully accepted and understood – and practiced – the local culture. The clergy at St. Francis Xavier’s present the liturgy with all its full ceremonial, using holy water, incense and chanting to an impressive degree, and in a manner which causes one to lament its (overall) passing in our New Zealand churches.

Singing the Mass

Liturgists are now urging us to “sing the Mass” as opposed to choosing pieces to sing at Mass. (Translation: we are being urged to return to the old “Sung Mass” as the norm for our solemn Sunday celebrations).

For example, how many NZ parishes are familiar with a sung (chanted) Preface before the Eucharistic prayer, with the congregations responding in song to the priest in the introductory dialogue, and concluding with the grand chorus of acclamation in the “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord”? This is taken for granted as the usual Sunday norm at St. Francis church, Kuta, Bali!

The Liturgy

Use of the Missal

In a country where Christianity in general, and Catholicism in particular, are in the minority, the Sunday Missal has become a very important tool in “grounding” the Catholic faith.

The Indonesian Bishops’ Conference has produced and published a (heavily subsidized) permanently bound Sunday Missal complete with markers and a “liturgical” zip – up case. It seems to be a highly revered and treasured possession of those who own it. I was told that it costs 40,000 Indonesian Rupiah a copy (at the current rate of exchange, about \$7.00 NZ). It contains all of the Mass texts for the three year cycle, with music settings, psalm settings and responses, Alleluia and Gospel Acclamations, Memorial Acclamations, as well as a collection of hymns in the Indonesian language, (all annotated in a figured system of notes of the scale for those who cannot read music). I am guessing when I surmise that the publication of this missal has standardized the Catholic liturgy and its music throughout the Archipelago of Indonesia. At least half of the congregation of St. Francis Xavier seemed to own a copy, which was shared with those who did not have (could not afford?¹) one. Everyone seemed very familiar with the music being sung.

The Entrance Rite

At the sound of a bell, the full procession, led by a cross bearer, wound its way from the back door of the sacristy through the outside congregation. This year (2005) two concelebrants joined the parish priests. The four servers were fully vested in soutanes of the seasonal colour, complete with lace-edged surplices and coloured capuccios to match – obviously the best “temple” garb! (Two walked barefoot-presumably they did not own shoes). Both boys and girls acted as servers.

¹ According to the Federal Research Division of the US Library of Congress, 1998, the average salaries in Indonesia varied from Rp32, 000 per month for low-paid labour, to Rp84, 000 for industrial work and Rp260, 000 in the most lucrative industries. 2005 anecdotal surveys suggest that these have increased, and that the subsidized Missal would currently equate to one weeks’ wages.

The congregation sang the processional hymn confidently, led by the choir and organ inside the church, and relayed over loudspeakers to those outside. The celebrant was happily relaxed, gesturing to those he passed with joined hands, a broad smile and a bow of the head. It was completely natural to return the bow!

Ministers of the Eucharist in this procession were robed in white with a distinguishing neckband. The official ushers on duty at the door wore sashes.

When the procession finally entered the church and reached the Sanctuary, Mass began with a chanted sign of the cross and liturgical greeting, with everyone singing the responses.

The Penitential Rite

The Penitential Rite was replaced by the sprinkling with holy water. This is normal practice at the Sunday celebrations. The priest and attendant servers emerged once more from the side doors of the church, the server was holding up a large silver “temple bowl” and the priest was wielding a large sprinkler the size of a dish mop (with both hands) as he sprinkled the congregation on a circuit similar to the entrance procession. (Very refreshing in the 33 degree temperatures!) All crossed themselves as they received the holy water, and some genuflected. This took some time, but no-one was in a hurry. Meanwhile, the whole congregation joined with the choir inside in singing the “Asperges me” (in Latin, if somewhat slowly and with some extra Indonesian pauses here and there). The man standing next to me kindly offered to share his Missal for this chant: I politely declined and proceeded to sing the Asperges from memory. (His smiling nods of appreciation at its conclusion seemed to confirm that I was, indeed a proper Catholic!)

Everyone then joined in the sung Gloria after the priest’s intonation, those outside joining in just as vigorously as those within. The opening prayer was chanted strongly by the priest, with everyone joining in a voluble “AMIN” too the old Gregorian tone.

Liturgy of the Word

I no longer go into culture shock when hearing God addressed as “Allah” in the prayers. I quickly realized that this is simply the Indonesian word for “God”. The readings were read clearly (and with obvious preparation) by the female and male readers. A cantor sang the psalm, with all joining in the response given in the Missal. The Book of the Gospels was processed with the solemnity and incense to the lectern, followed by two candle bearers, while all joined in the Alleluia to an Indonesian melody with hints of Gregorian Chant. The Gospel was proclaimed (not sung) by the celebrant. After the sermon (quite lively!) the Creed was recited, but the prayers of the faithful had a sung response, led by the cantor. All then sat for the preparation rites.

Michael F. McConnell will continue to share his experiences of Liturgy in Bali in our next issues.

Michael McConnell, Choirmaster at St Joseph’s Cathedral, Dunedin, for 41 years was presented with the Benemerenti Medal for his service to Church music by the newly appointed Papal Nuncio to New Zealand, Archbishop Charles Balvo, on the 20th March 2006, the Feast of St Joseph, Patron of the Cathedral and of the Diocese of Dunedin.