

Holy Mass in Bali – Part II

A humbling experience

Michael F. McConnell

The Preparation of the Gifts

The procession of the gifts is quite formal, with all the Greeters/Ushers who wore coloured sashes to denote their function – joining in. Besides the bread, wine and water and the collection bags, flower offerings for the altar are often included in the procession which does not simply bow before retiring, but forms up and kneels in the aisle to receive the blessing of the celebrant. Incensation of the gifts, altar, ministers and people is still taken for granted, while the choir sings a motet/hymn in the Indonesian language.

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The prayer over the gifts is chanted, as the introductory dialogue leading into the changed preface. The whole congregation sings the “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord”. To my ears, the language adapts easily to the old Gregorian tones: the melodic responses of the old Latin liturgy are still very recognizable; and the impression is left that we in New Zealand have lost something in our liturgies by dropping the chanting of the responses and preface. (However, in the Dunedin Diocese, and elsewhere, priests are making the effort to reintroduce the chanting of the invitation “Let us proclaim the mystery of faith” and the doxology which concludes the Eucharistic Prayer. A smaller number of priests is willing to chant the preface).

Liturgy of the Eucharist

The Eucharistic prayer is spoken. The moment of Consecration is one of obvious deep devotion: the chief altar server has his/her moment as a huge temple – gong, suspended in its carved frame, is struck. The sound reverberates throughout the assembly. Altar Server No 2 rings the sanctuary bell in a continuous peal throughout the elevations and genuflections. Many joined hands are raised to foreheads in the traditional Hindu gesture of reverence.

The anamnesis is sung, as is the great “Amen” following the doxology chanted by the celebrant(s). The Our Father is sung by all to a chant obviously adapted from the old “Pater Noster” chant, which fits easily to the Indonesian language. Strangely, there is no sign of peace: the “Lamb of God” is simply begun by the choir, and taken up by all.

Reverence for the Eucharist

The Balinese Catholics have obviously been taught a deep appreciation of the real presence: their outward sense of devotion is a salutary lesson for all of us from other countries. The setting of St Francis Xavier Church builds on the local piety: lighted candles are all about – two on either side of the richly-carved wooden tabernacle in a prominent alcove to the side of the sanctuary; two at the lectern; two each at both ends of the altar table, as well as large and small votive candles flickering in their stands before the statues of the Blessed Virgin and St Joseph (which have a distinctly Balinese/ non-European aspect.)

Whenever the ciboria containing Sacred Hosts are carried (eg to/from the tabernacle, or by extra-ordinary ministers to/from the communion stations at all the doors of the church) they are raised to eye-level; it is evident to all that the Blessed Sacrament is being carried amidst the people. My Indonesian Catholic friends in Dunedin have explained the reason for this custom; the Lord must be raised higher than the bearer or those surrounding. (If you are very tall, then you bow profoundly so that you are lower than the Lord who is passing!)

The choir sings during the distribution of Holy Communion, after which a thanksgiving hymn in Indonesian is sung by all. The large numbers in the congregation can make the Communion time quite lengthy, but no-one is in a hurry, and no one leaves early.

The Concluding Rites

The priest chants the final prayer and all sing, the “Amin” (Indonesian spelling). Then follow the announcements which include details of local events in the life of the Church in Kuta, Denpasar (the capital city), and beyond. These are quite extensive – they may take up to ten minutes – and seem to entail much ad-libbing, and laughter among the congregation which listens attentively. The final greeting, blessings and dismissal are chanted. Only then comes the Sign of Peace “Salam Damai” which is shared enthusiastically by all. Organ music covers the procession to the main doors of the church where everything becomes very informal as priests and ministers break off in all directions to give the sign of peace to, and to greet, the 300 or so parishioners outside. (My Indonesian friends tell me that this placement of the sign of peace is being reviewed, as Rome wishes it restored to its liturgical place before communion.)

The Church opens onto one of the busy thoroughfares of Kuta South; Mass has lasted at least an hour and a half, with the local Balinese passers-by often stopping to look, listen and take it all in. About fifteen minutes before Mass finishes several ancient and/ or crippled old ladies and mothers holding babies have stationed themselves at the boundary gates with hands outstretched for alms. It is to be hoped that the Catholic community has gained a reputation for charity!

The tourists like myself at the Mass are included in the smiles, modes of welcome, and greetings of the dispensing congregation.

A concluding thought; the Balinese Catholic Community does not have to “rediscover the beauty of the Mass.” They have never lost it.

I returned “on pilgrimage” to Kuta – Bali in January 2006. The new church, although far from completed, has progressed so much that the interior is able to be used for Sunday Masses.

It is of Cathedral proportions, boasting air conditioning, an impressive raised Sanctuary area (beautifully decorated even in its unfinished state) and a crypt area big enough for an overflow congregation of about 500 to participate in ceremonies at Christmas and Easter via closed-circuit television. I attended the morning Mass in the Indonesian language, rather than the Sunday evening English language Mass for tourists. The congregation numbered about 1,200(!) necessitating volunteers to lay out about 400 extra chairs of the “plastic-stockable” type.



A new (?) tabernacle has yet to be constructed. Three priests concelebrated the Mass, assisted by six vested servers who were stationed in “Choir formation” seating at each end of the narrow but long width raised Sanctuary area. The choir and organ are positioned in the left transept, with the right transept used for congregation.

I did not consciously note the absence of children at this Mass until after the final notices, when suddenly five or six “classes” of children escorted by their teachers (maybe 70-100 in all) entered the Church, and processed up the aisle, each to receive an individual blessing from the priest before rejoining their parents. They had been receiving “Sunday School” type instruction in the crypt area for the duration of the Mass.

The future for this thriving Catholic Community seems ensured!

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