



A MESSAGE FROM THE INTERNATIONAL ECCLESIASTICAL ASSISTANT

September 2016

It has been about a month since many of us gathered in Manzini, Swaziland for the Sixth Congress of the English Speaking Africa Region of CICIAMS. The theme for the Congress was “Scaling up Africa Health Services through Nurses, the Merciful Carers of Humanity.” Almost 300 people attended, including two bishops – Bishop José Luis Ponce de León, the bishop of Manzini, and Bishop Frank de Gouveia, the bishop of Oudtshoorn, South Africa, who is the liaison between the Southern Africa Catholic Bishops Conference and CATHCA (the Catholic network of health care institutions and health care providers in Southern Africa) – who were present for much of the conference. The Prime Minister of Swaziland, the Right Honorable Dr. S. B. Dlamini, officially opened the conference. The members of the Congress also witnessed to our Catholic faith in a march through the streets of the city center of Manzini, led by a marching band, from the conference center to the Cathedral for our opening Mass.

The speakers during the three days of the Congress were both informative and inspirational. Either by accident or by divine providence, an image emerged from many of the talks that suggested that the five senses (sight, touch, hearing, taste and smell) of a Catholic nurse need to be focused on the patient. This began visually by simply *seeing* the members of the Swaziland Catholic Nurses Guild. Their motto, printed on the shirts that they wore, was “See Christ in every person.” In fact, these words often served as an introduction to the talks: The speaker would begin: “See Christ!” All would respond: “In every person.” The speaker would continue: “In every person.” And all would respond again, “See Christ.”

Having experienced the importance of seeing Christ in our patients and in all those who come to us, we moved to the image of touch. Msgr. Jean-Marie Mupendawatu, Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers, had prepared a paper to be delivered at the conference. Unfortunately, following the death of Archbishop Zygmunt Zimowski, the President of the Pontifical Council, the monsignor was unable to be with us because of other pressing duties. He sent his paper, which I had the honor of reading to the Congress. Msgr. Mupendawatu wrote of the importance of *touch*. He spoke of the accounts of healing present in the Gospels, and suggested:

Touch appears to be important even though probably it was not indispensable. But touch is a 'reciprocal' sense. The touching that Jesus engages in acquires a deep meaning: the sick person feels the love of the Lord, his compassion, and Jesus perceives his or her anxiety, everything that is not said that lies behind his or her illness.

The monsignor continued:

Putting a hand on a person's shoulders, offering a smile, bending towards an elderly or sick person, taking him or her by the hand or in one's arms, putting one's head against his or her head, hugging him or her, as Pope Francis knows to do so well with the sick people he visits in a very natural way: it is through these expressions of our body that we transcribe into reality the 'I was sick and you visited me' of Matthew 25:36. It is through these gestures that the Lord makes himself present, through us, near to a rather lost elderly person; it is the hand of the Lord, in our hand, who holds his or her bony, thin and very weakened hand. It is through our hand that the hand of God is placed on a sick person.

The talk which I gave at the Congress focused on **hearing** and listening. I began by changing the motto of the Swaziland nurses a bit – to: "Hear Christ in every person; in every person hear Christ!" Following the theme of the Congress, I suggested that an important resource for nurses, no matter where they come from, is simply to listen. As Pope Francis has said, "Listening creates havens of care, concern, mercy, and solidarity." I suggested that as caregivers, we all need to:

- Listen more than we speak;
- Not give an answer until we know the question;
- Be more humble and let the patient help shape our understanding of health care;
- Act with greater honesty, conviction, courage and faith.

No one at the Congress spoke about the senses of taste and smell, but it would not be too great a leap to understand that what the Congress was trying to do was, in the words of Pope Francis, allow us all to "take on the **smell** of the sheep," our sick brothers and sisters.

Bishop Jose Ponce de León seemed to sum up the Congress during his homily at Mass when he said that the challenge for Catholic nurses was to **be** Christ to those we serve.

I'm sure that all of us left Manzini renewed in our commitment to see Christ, to hear Christ, to extend the touch of Christ, and to be Christ to all who come to us for aid.

May God continue to bless all of you in your important work,

Fr. Tom