

Liturgists call for more meaningful feasts, symbols

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A priest uses incense during a special Mass recognizing the Chinese New Year at Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church in Jakarta, Indonesia, Feb. 18, 2007. (CNS /Agus Y. Ranu)

Makati City, Philippines

Southeast Asian liturgists say new church feasts need to be added to liturgical calendars while religious symbols that that have no meaning in their area need to be replaced.

"Given that time is relative, that situations are provisional, and that culture and traditions are in constant evolution, the church should continue to revise, reinvent, and create liturgical feasts that meet the actual needs of the faithful," the liturgists said in a statement.

The liturgists, including religious and laypeople, made these recommendations in a statement produced by the 13th Asian Liturgical Forum for Southeast Asia, held Sept. 16-21 near Manila.

Fifty-one participants from Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam were joined by observers from Australia and Taiwan for the gathering at San Carlos Seminary in Makati City. They prayed together, reported on liturgical developments in their countries and reflected on the forum theme: "Liturgical Year and Inculturation."

Benedictine Fr. Anscar Chupungco, executive director of the Asian Liturgical Forum and director of the Paul VI Institute of Liturgy in Malaybalay, the Philippines, pointed out that the world has evolved from an agricultural milieu to a more industrial one today.

The church included feasts in the liturgical calendar that recognized the celebration of harvests and other activities of earlier times. But now, he said at the closing session on Sept. 19, other feasts are called for that acknowledge industrialization and other changes in society.

Philippine Bishop Julius Tonel of Ipil similarly told UCA News that with the workforce moving from a rural to an urban setting, special feasts are needed.

"Why not have feasts for call center and IT workers, as we did with the farmers?" the bishop asked. "The church has always tried to keep up with the needs of its people and the changes in society," he added.

Chupungco also said some symbols for feasts already in the liturgical calendar need to be changed because they have little or no meaning to Catholics in Asia.

He cited Easter celebrations using symbols taken from northern countries with distinct spring seasons, whereas tropical regions have summer-like weather almost all year round.

"If you read the liturgy carefully, analyze the prayers and look at the symbols, you realize the symbols do not match what you experience in your regions," the Benedictine priest said.

Fr. Robert Leong pointed out that in Brunei, where he serves as parish priest, liturgical inculturation is usually for the Dusun and Iban tribe members. However, the majority of Massgoers in Brunei are Filipinos and a small number of Chinese, who are used to Western liturgies, he noted.

The Rev. Jukka Helle, a Lutheran missionary in Thailand, was the only non-Catholic delegate. Attending his fourth forum, he said the 4,000 Lutherans in Thailand are part of the same liturgical tradition as Roman Catholics and can learn a lot from the Catholic experience.

In their statement, participants noted that inculturation "normally takes place within the framework of approved liturgical books, whereby the substantial unity of the Roman Rite is preserved." They stressed: "The inculturation of the liturgical calendar does not result in a totally new calendar that is an alternative to the typical edition of the Roman Rite."

But they also acknowledged that inculturation might not always be sufficient to address local needs.

Bishop Tonel stressed the value of teaching church members about liturgy and liturgical developments. "All of this effort to inculturate and develop meaningful liturgy would be a waste if we cannot put what we discuss into a catechesis our people will understand," he told UCA News.

Before ending, participants decided that the next forum will be held in Penang, Malaysia, in October 2010 and will focus on the Sacrament of Baptism.

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