

WUCWO General Assembly, Dakar.
Homily Saturday 20 October

We are sinners, but also the mystical body of Christ
(Ephesians 1,23)

You will have to forgive me if I begin my homily on a sombre note. Most of us here had an outing to Gorée Island yesterday. This was a lovely outing in many ways and we can be grateful to the organizers. However, I for one have felt a burden of sadness ever since, especially from visiting the Slave House. You may know that in 1992, Pope John Paul II visited Gorée island. Speaking at that same Slave House he stated: “From this African sanctuary of black pain, we implore forgiveness from heaven.” Then he acknowledged that most of the men enslaving these Africans were Christian. He prayed for forgiveness for the “horrible aberration” of slavery “that Christian white men committed in their pillage of Africa.” We know that the Portuguese were the first slavers on this island in 1442. When we visited the pretty Catholic church shortly after visiting the slave house, I asked myself, “did those men who were running the Slave House attend Sunday Mass here?”

Excuse me staying on a sombre note, but I also want to mention sins that the church commits today. In our General Assembly, we have been asked by the Dicastery of Laity, Family, and Life to adopt a protocol concerning the safeguarding of minors and vulnerable persons. This is being asked of all lay associations, and we all know the reason. A list of scandals have broken out in different countries in recent years concerning sexual abuse by priests and the covering up of these crimes by bishops. Some of the most recent scandals have come from the USA, earlier ones were from my country, Ireland. In the USA, the President of the American Bishops Conference recently stated, “I have no illusions about the degree to which trust in the bishops has been damaged by these past sins and failures,” and he added, “It will take work to rebuild that trust.”

Here in our own community of WUCWO, we are also aware of our own weaknesses. We know that our priests do not always render an ideal service to our national organizations. We know also that conflicts emerge between our women members that are all-too-human in their motivation. We see such conflicts occurring both within national organizations and between different organizations.

And yet, in spite of all this, we hear today one of the most beautiful descriptions of the Church that is found in the Bible. The author of the Letter to the Ephesians states. “The father of glory” put all things in the universe beneath the feet of our Lord Jesus Christ and, also, he gave Jesus Christ “As head over all things to the church, which is his Body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.” So we are told that we are the body of Christ, who is the head of the Church. Also, we are reminded of the same point we heard yesterday. Christ will come again at the end of time and “fill all things in every way.” Consequently, we members of the Church are witnesses, before the event, of the way that the values of love will come to prevail

in human history and how the whole of history will be taken up into Christ at the end of time, and made a perfect offering to God the Father.

How do we combine this high vision of the Church with the sinful reality of how we sinful human beings often behave as Christians? Well, this is certainly a mystery. But we remember that Christ came to save sinners, not those who were perfect. We also remember that Christ died for our sins and because of our sins. However, he rose again, forgave us, and invites us to allow him to direct our actions today. In truth, however, we will never fully understand how God is working out such important developments through us who are so imperfect. Nevertheless, here in our General Assembly, I can honestly say that I have had a strong sense of how God is among us, and this has brought me much spiritual joy. Yesterday, I mentioned how I noticed the depth of silence in our room after we had received Holy Communion. At that moment, I found it easy to believe that we, who had just received the Body of Christ, were also, ourselves, the Body of Christ. Also, when we debated and voted on our resolutions, I believe we did so with such a spirit of harmony that I am convinced that this was the work of the Holy Spirit within us.

Today, in our General Assembly we proceed to another sacred moment in our journey of this week. We elect our board members who will elect our new President General. Let us be sure to remain in the Spirit as it is clear we have been doing up to this point. Let us seek to discern the candidate who is God's choice to lead us during the next four years. We are an important part of the Church, and we have a mission to carry out. And so today, as during the next four years of our lives as WUCWO members, let us try to live this mystery to the best of our abilities: We are sinners who live in a sinful Church. And at the same time, we are the mystical body of Christ with a role of the highest important for all men and women, and for all human history.

Readings

- First reading: Letter of St Paul to the Ephesians 1:15-23
- Psalm 144:10-11. 12-13ab. 17-18
- Gospel: Luk. 12: 8-12