

THE BATOR WEEK: The impact and the Legacy

Michael Gill

He arrived on Wednesday, flew out the following Tuesday. An amazing gift to us in so many ways.

For most of us, an “unknown”. Who would turn out to listen and contribute?

Fr Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, SJ aka Bator. Nigerian convert, growing up in a community where the various brands of Christian abused him and his Animist family and neighbours.

Growing up in a family of his father, seven wives and 27 siblings (I hope I recall the numbers correctly),

The Jesuits were the path to his conversion and ordination. Recently, he was the Jesuit boss in Africa and Madagascar, he was trained in and experienced both Theology and Business (both of which inform his work for the Synod on Synodality).

He is now Dean of Theology at Santa Clara University in the USA.

And of special relevance, his theological role for the Synod.

I knew I was going to have to write a review here.

And then I was asked by Jesuit Communications and ACCCR to write for them.

I've been working for a few months with Father Andy Nguyen SJ of North Sydney Parish on the Bator program. Very much an opportunity identified and acted on by Andy which I was invited to join. Very much a clericalist free zone.

So many organisations and individuals came on board to ensure that Bator had an exhausting three state, six event program to be covered in five days.

Writing something about Bator and the program I experienced is not easy. He is an unusual and exceptional human being and inspired such a broad range of people.

How does a priest from the Vatican, steeped in theology, surrounded by notorious bureaucracy carrying great responsibility for the outcome of the Synod and so close to the Pope, communicate with such calmness, such authenticity, such clarity and disarming credibility and, otherwise, remain so ordinary and natural.

How did he open the hearts and minds of those long committed to particular causes and inspire them to think anew.

I was fortunate enough to be present for some of the presentations and tune into others. I was especially honoured to spend some casual times with him, just having a chat wandering Taronga in search of Aussie animals.

This is a man without fear.

There is no sign of prioritising the protection of his status or position in the Church or reputation or superannuation.

He is a simple man and simply committed to the mission of Jesus Christ.

I think I heard correctly when he said, not just hinted with qualification, that theology which had no use or relevance for Mission was a waste of time.

This theologian can see the value of market principles. Again, from my recollection, he tackled ordination issues thus; any organisation which failed to make use of the gifts and talents of more than half of its people had a serious problem.

Common sense flowed. It was easy to follow.

Time and again he returned to the theme of our giftedness; the role of that giftedness in the delivery of the Mission entrusted to us by Jesus Christ and guided by the Spirit.

Time and again he returned to the origin, the permission, the authority all given to us at the time of our Baptism. A Baptism which delivers the same and unique Agency to each of us.

And coincidental or otherwise, his Catalyst/North Sydney presentation he gave us these messages was on Trinity Sunday; with a gospel bang on point for all.

Always reminding us that baptism is the only authority we need to exercise our Agency in the missionary role allocated to each of us.

Closer to the Synod and its purpose, in a calm and reassuring voice, we heard the same message that Pope Francis has been giving us now for several years.

The importance of being much better in **HOW** we communicate with each other, before we tackle the serious issues of church and life which may or may not require an ultimate decision of some sort. A decision which may be far removed from our starting point.

Why are we so reluctant to hear this message?

Bator also exudes patience, (with some twinkles of barely detectable exasperation!!!) something which we of the first world, largely European cultured, have walked away from largely because of the secular norms born of the preferences we have adopted for ourselves.

Eat what you kill;
the winner takes all;
just get to the bottom line;
do it now and use less than 20 words.

Again for all of that, we are just beginning to appreciate the necessary switch to understanding that the process has a value of its own, perhaps more important than the outcome.

I'm now reflecting on the fact that Bator and Andy and some other friends who have such a deep understanding of the purpose of the Synod are recent converts to the faith.

Maybe they see with fresh eyes. Maybe they cornered the market on the new wineskins

Bator and the others have courage.

Oh, that more of our bishops and priests had that courage. It comes naturally to Bator to understand the importance of being himself. He walks with the conviction, unthreatened; "what do I have to lose?"

I love this Pope, partially because I believe he knows he is fallible. He takes risks, expresses his opinions and sometimes slips his tongue.

I am not surprised by his mistakes at least as I see things.

In sessions that I was at or tuned into, unsurprisingly Bator was asked about the recent CBC interview aware that the Pope unequivocally and somewhat harshly, rejected the notion of the Diaconate for women.

Applying my words to his response, he was gutted and for a time wondered if it was worthwhile continuing with the work of the Synod.

What representative, indeed high representative of the Vatican speaks like that. Surely when you go back to Rome, it will simply be a short layover on the way to Siberia.

No; no more. Hopefully that has gone for good.
Hopefully we can finally call time on the antics of the Inquisition

We know that the man in the whitecap respects everybody's opinion and knows the importance of encouraging dialogue and careful and respectful listening.

I watched people as Bator dealt with the female deacon question on several occasions, different events.

Some faces expressed amazement.

What have we got in this man Bator;
Doesn't he know that if you come from the Vatican, you hold the line with no exception; you fall into line supporting what the Pope or some other senior person has said.
Under no circumstances show in division in the ranks.

Clearly, the rules have changed.

I hope that Bator is an example today of the sort of honest transparent communicator whose courage and commitment is needed for the future and relevant Mission of all of us.

Again, from what he shared with us, let's reduce the number of times we start a question with "Why doesn't the church"

We have been reminded that we are the church. In essence, it's not a building or a bureaucratic organisation. It's, me and you and all of us individually and as companions walking together and on Mission.

We just have to get on with it recognising and using our giftedness.

God is watching us and maybe not from much of a distance.
(any youngsters, ask your parents or grandparents about the song)

Andy Nguyen, thanks for your wisdom and you got on with it.

Fr Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, SJ thanks for coming to see us. Let's make sure it's not the last time. All our prayers and good wishes are with you and Pope Francis. Can you help him with his tongue slips please.

Michael Gil is a leading member of VOCAL (Voices Of Catholic Adult Laity) and is deeply engaged with the North Sydney Parish. Michael has practised law for more than 40 years, much of the time as an insurance lawyer. In retirement, he lectures on law in various Pacific Islands.