

CELEBRATING 500 YEARS OF CHRISTIANITY

A Beautiful Journey of Faith

In 2021 the Church in the Philippines marks half a millennium of Christianity. Statistics in 2015 show that the Philippine population has exceeded 100 million. The Philippines is the world's third largest local Church (after Brazil and Mexico). Of Asia's 120+ million Catholics over 60% are Filipinos. These significant facts invite deeper exploration of the multi-faceted Philippine Church.

Some may ask: Why celebrate this event? Bishop Broderick Pabillo explains: "This is indeed something to celebrate, for in 500 years the Christian faith in the country has not only survived, but has been a strong influence in the culture and character of the nation, and is still going strong.... The 2021 celebration will be marked with great thanksgiving to Almighty God for the great gift of the Christian faith. In God's providence the Christian faith has come to our shore, took root in it, and bore much fruit among its people." Bishop Pablo David notes that the focus of the 2021 celebration is "not colonialism but the Christian faith" that early Filipinos "welcomed as a gift, albeit from people who were not necessarily motivated by the purest of motives."

In addition, this quinquennial event is not seen to be only a "looking back to the past"; it is also a time of expressing profound gratitude and a looking forward to the future. Having received the gift of faith, it must be deepened, developed, and shared with others through mission. The advice of Jesus to his disciples should be our guide: "What you have received as a gift, give as a gift" (Mt 10:8). Indeed, as the CBCP logo for the 2021 event asserts: we are all "gifted to give." This is a challenge to both celebrate our faith and be vigorously motivated to go and share this precious gift with others.

This presentation will unfold by noting nine gifts Christianity has brought to the Philippines; indeed, more could be mentioned. Thus, there will be some brief historical data given to highlight the gift; reflection questions will help us explore how we are called to develop the gift and pass it on to others.

1. Gift of Christian Faith. After the introduction of Christianity by Ferdinand Magellan in March 1521, an organized program of evangelization was begun in 1565 by the Augustinians who accompanied Legazpi's expedition. They were followed by Franciscans (1578), Jesuits (1581), Dominicans (1587), and Augustinian Recollects (1606) from both Spain and Mexico. Manila became a bishopric in 1579 and an archbishopric in 1595.

The early missionaries often sought to protect the natives from abuses. The Philippine Church of the sixteenth century certainly took sides, and it was not with the rich and powerful, but with those who were oppressed and victims of injustice. Church historian Schumacher notes: "Skeptics have often questioned the reality of the rapid conversion of sixteenth-century Filipinos. If one wishes the answer, it is to be found right here, that the Church as a whole took the side of the poor and the oppressed, whether the oppressors were Spaniards or Filipino *principales*."

Reflection Questions: How can Filipinos today (both religious and lay) imitate the zeal of the missionaries? What approaches are needed to transmit the faith today?

2. Education and Social Services. These tasks were almost exclusively the concern of the Church during the entire period of Spanish rule. Before the end of the sixteenth century, Manila had three hospitals, one for Spaniards, another for natives, and a third for the Chinese. The first two were conducted by Franciscans, the third by the Dominicans. In 1595 the Jesuits opened a grammar school for Spanish boys that later developed into the University of San Ignacio and had attached to it the residential college of San José, founded in 1601 and today the San José Seminary.

The year 1611 saw the beginnings of the Dominican University of Santo Tomás, which continues today as a vibrant educational center. In 1640 the Dominicans also took charge of the College of San Juan de Letrán, started about a decade earlier by a zealous layman for the education of orphans. Various religious communities of women established themselves in Manila; frequently, they undertook the education of girls. Among these sisterhoods, that begun by Ignacia del Espíritu Santo, a Chinese *mestiza*, in 1684 and today known as the Religious of the Virgin Mary (RVM), deserves special mention.

Reflection Questions: Where do you see the continuing apostolates of the Church contributing to Philippine life today? Have you personally benefitted from these services?

3. Development of the Local Clergy. Catholicism had taken permanent root in the Philippines as the religion of the people by the eighteenth century, if not earlier. However, one serious weakness was the retarded development of the native clergy. Apparently, only in the late seventeenth century were native Filipinos ordained. Bishops became increasingly eager for a diocesan clergy completely under their jurisdiction. Archbishop Sancho de Santa Justa y Rufina of Manila (1767-1787) ordained natives even when they lacked the necessary aptitude and training; the results proved disastrous. Some improvement in formation and an increase in vocations occurred after the arrival of the Vincentians (1862), who took charge of diocesan seminaries. Among the active priest-leaders and spokesmen were Fathers Gómez, Burgos, and Zamora (GOMBURZA), who were executed by the government for alleged complicity in a mutiny of native garrison troops in Cavite (1872).

Reflection Questions: How can the Church better appreciate the contributions of *both* the diocesan clergy and the religious clergy? What is your experience with your local parish priest?

4. Second Wave of Missionaries. The normal life of the Catholic Church suffered disastrously during the years following 1898; from 1898 to 1903 the total number of friars decreased over 75% from 1,013 to 246. The severe shortage of priests and religious was met in part by new, non-Spanish missionary congregations of women and men from Europe, Australia, and America. For example, male missionary societies that responded to the pressing needs in the 1905-1941 period are: Irish Redemptorists (1905), Mill Hill Missionaries (1906), Scheut-CICM (1907), Sacred Heart Missionaries and Divine Word Society (1908), LaSalle Brothers (1911), Oblates of Saint Joseph (1915), Maryknoll Missioners [men and women] (1926), Columban Missioners (1929), Society of Saint Paul (1935), Quebec-PME Society (1937), and Oblates-OMI

(1939). Many dedicated female religious came as missionaries to the Philippines, often working in partnership with the societies just mentioned.

Reflection Questions: What has been the role of foreign missionaries in preserving the faith in the Philippines? Are missionaries from other countries still needed in the Philippines?

5. War and Church Services. Japanese forces invaded in December 1941. Allied forces under General MacArthur returned in 1944, but severe fighting continued until the Japanese surrender in August 1945. The war inflicted heavy damage; 257 priests and religious lost their lives, and losses in ecclesiastical property and equipment were estimated at 250 million pesos (U.S. \$ 125 million). Priests, brothers, sisters, and dedicated Catholic women and men exhibited great faith and heroism during the war; many suffered imprisonment.

The origins of what is known today as the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) can be traced back to February 1945 when Apostolic Delegate William Piani, even as the war was still raging, appointed John Hurley, SJ to take charge of relief work and created the Catholic Welfare Organization (CWO). The 1945-1965 period in the life of the local Church in the Philippines is characterized by: quite rapid recovery from the ravages of war, greatly expanded school system at upper levels, involvement of Catholics (laity, sisters, clergy) in social action, and growing Filipinization of Church structures.

Reflection Questions: Why is social involvement and witnessing to justice an essential aspect of the Church's mission? Share any of your personal experiences on these matters.

6. Experience of Authoritarian Rule. Ferdinand E. Marcos, first elected president in 1965, declared martial law in 1972 and imposed a form of "constitutional authoritarianism." The martial law period posed new, challenging questions for the Church and nation. Among the more pernicious effects of the two-decade Marcos era (1965-1986) were: increased militarization, insurgency, the absence of juridical procedures, the destruction of democratic processes, economic decline, and pervasive fear. The end result, in the words of a Filipino social scientist, was to place the country "on the trembling edge of a social volcano."

This period proved a time of testing and growth for the local Church. Prophetic stances were often met by military abuse, imprisonment and torture, and even deportation for foreign missionaries. The Church evolved a position of "critical collaboration," cooperating with the regime on programs beneficial to the populace while criticizing government actions judged harmful. An important 1977 CBCP pastoral letter, *The Bond of Love in Proclaiming the Good News*, sought to enunciate a clear, holistic vision to guide the Church's mission of integral evangelization.

Reflections Questions: Why must the Church strive to bring the Gospel message into *all dimensions* of life (not only "religious aspects"). Can you narrate some personal examples?

7. Restoration of Democracy. An analysis of the story of the "bloodless revolution" of February 1986 and the roles played by Church people and Cardinal Sin is instructive. The overthrow of the Marcos regime was "a victory of *moral* values over the sheer physical force on

which he had relied.” It signaled people’s determination not to shed Filipino blood. The revolution was a “movement for active non-violence which was promoted by Church-related groups.”

Corazon C. Aquino served as Philippine president from 1986-1992. Aquino’s main contribution was the reestablishment of a democratically functioning government. Difficult issues faced Aquino; yet, she guided the Filipino people to free and fair elections in May 1992 and the orderly transfer of power to President Fidel Ramos (1992-1998). Aquino, an “icon of integrity,” died on August 1, 2009.

Reflection Questions: Why is it absolutely essential to know our nation’s history in order not to repeat the mistakes of the past? Why must we always avoid “revisionist history”?

8. Emergence of Filipino Missionaries. A definite sign of a vibrant local Church is its mission outreach. In mid-2000 Catholic Filipino missionaries numbered 1,329 women and 206 men from 69 religious congregations serving in some 80 countries. The Catholic bishops established the Mission Society of the Philippines (1965). Maryknoll founded the Philippine Catholic Lay Mission (1977). Cardinal Sin established the San Lorenzo Mission Institute (1987), whose goal is serving the Chinese. A major local Church mission milestone was achieved in the 1991 month-long Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP-II).

Reflection Questions: Why is missionary outreach central to the Church? Would you consider becoming a volunteer religious educator?

9. Implementation of Vatican II. The vision of the Second Vatican Council has taken root in the Philippine Church. The presence of strong Base Christian Communities (BECs) provides grass roots structures for spiritual, catechetical, ministerial, and social growth. Important strengths are present in this vision of Church: the inductive and experiential approach of theology; its inculturated social teaching; its spirituality of human development; its renewed ecclesiology and missiology; its concrete service to many Filipinos facing diverse dehumanizing social ills; its engagement in social issues in a non-partisan but active manner; its efforts to promote and practice non-violent approaches to socio-political crises; its commitment to create structures of participation in Church and society. The local Church also has its witnesses and martyrs, especially Saints Lorenzo Ruiz and Pedro Calungsod.

Reflection Questions: Why is it important that the Church actively engage in issues of social justice, peace, and ecology? If possible, share your experience of the Basic Ecclesial Communities.

Conclusion. Undeniably, the most significant Church event of 2015 was the January 15-19 pastoral visit of Pope Francis; he told the crowds that when he saw the destructive effects of the 2013 typhoon on television, he decided to come to comfort his brothers and sisters. Affectionately nicknamed *Lolo Kiko* (Grandfather Francis) by the huge crowds, he won their hearts and souls. He emphatically asserted: “The poor are at the center of the Gospel, are at the heart of the Gospel; if we take away the poor from the Gospel, we cannot understand the whole

message of Jesus Christ.” The most moving part of the papal visit was Pope Francis’ presence in Tacloban, the city hardest hit by the 2013 typhoon.

Thanking Pope Francis for his pastoral visit, Cardinal Tagle captured the people’s sentiments and mission commitment; he said: “Every Filipino wants to go with you—not to Rome—but to the peripheries, to the shanties, to prison cells, to hospitals, to the world of politics, finance, arts, sciences, culture, education and social communications. We will go to these worlds to bring the light of Jesus, Jesus who is the center of your pastoral visit and the cornerstone of the Church.”

[J. Kroeger]