

# RECEIVING AND SHARING GIFTS

## Five Centuries of Philippine Christianity



**James H. Kroeger, MM**

In 2021 the Church in the Philippines marks half a millennium of Christianity. Statistics in 2020 show that the Philippine population has reached nearly 110 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 quincentennial 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 Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) logo for the 2021 event asserts: we are all

“gifted to give.” This is a challenge to both celebrate the Christian faith and be vigorously motivated to go and share this precious gift with others.

This presentation will unfold by noting ten gifts Christianity has brought to the Philippines; indeed, more could be mentioned. There will be some brief historical data given to contextualize the gifts. However, more importantly, appreciating these special gifts today demands a commitment to explore how all are called to further develop the gifts and pass them on to others.

**1. Gift of Christian Faith.** After the introduction of Christianity by Ferdinand Magellan in March 1521, a systematic and 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; they had a vigorous leader in Fray Domingo de Salazar, OP, the first bishop of the Philippines. 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 John 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*.” Promoting both faith and justice remains a perennial task of every local Church.

**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. Numerous educational institutions and social action centers operated by the Church continue to play an important role in Philippine life.

**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 social 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); they are considered national heroes today. Historically, the slow development of the local clergy remained a serious limitation; thus, the departure of a large proportion of Spanish clergy after the transfer of sovereignty from Spain to the United States (1898) left over 700 parishes vacant. Today the Filipino diocesan and religious clergy effectively manage the Church. An interesting historical note is that of the forty-nine bishops from the Philippines who attended the Second

Vatican Council (1962-1965), fully one-third were expatriate missionary bishops; today all the country's bishops are Filipino.

**4. Continuing Missionary Presence.** 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. This 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, during the "second wave" of mission personnel (1905-1941), male missionary societies that responded to the pressing needs were: 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). Most of these societies have personnel in the country today. It is important to note that many dedicated female religious came as missionaries to the Philippines, often working in partnership with the societies just mentioned.

**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.

**6. Church Action under 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.

Pivotal words from this 1977 pastoral letter remain relevant today: “This is EVANGELIZATION: the proclamation, above all, of SALVATION from sin; the liberation from everything oppressive to man; the DEVELOPMENT of man in all his dimensions, personal and communitarian; and ultimately, the RENEWAL OF SOCIETY in all its strata through the interplay of the GOSPEL TRUTHS and man’s concrete TOTAL LIFE.... THIS IS OUR TASK. THIS IS OUR MISSION” (emphasis in original text).

**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.” However, basic social issues of wealth and

power that plagued the nation for generations remained. Many Filipinos still found themselves outside the mainstream of national social, political, and economic life.

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.

**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 Lorenzo Mission Institute (1987), whose goal is serving the Filipino-Chinese, communities of Chinese descent abroad, and China mission.

Aside from these recent groups founded in the Vatican II era, all the major religious societies and congregations of men and women continue to send some of their Filipino members to serve in overseas mission. One must note that a major local Church mission milestone was achieved in the 1991 month-long Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP-II); it provided a profound rationale and impetus for "renewed integral evangelization."

**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 recent witnesses and martyrs (to mention only a few): Malaybalay diocesan priest Neri Satur (October 14, 1991), Bishop Benjamin de Jesus, OMI (February 4, 1997), Father Rhoel Gallardo, CMF (May 3, 2000), Father Benjamin Inocencio, OMI (December 28, 2000), and Scholastic “Ritchie” Fernando, SJ (October 17, 1996). Several foreign missionaries, especially those working in Mindanao, have also been murdered or deported over recent decades. The Philippine Church rejoices in its two canonized saints, Lorenzo Ruiz and Pedro Calungsod, both martyrs and foreign missionaries (Japan and Guam).

**10. Emergence of a Genuine Local Church.** One may validly assert that over the past five centuries an authentic local Church has emerged in the Philippines; undoubtedly, this is a wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit! This local faith-community exemplifies the vision propagated by the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), which asserts that “the local church is a church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions—in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own” (FABC I: 12).

The FABC challenge to engage in a “triple dialogue” with the local people, their cultures, and their religions as a verified pathway to building an authentic local Church has been guiding Church leadership in this Vatican II era. This “incarnational approach” has proven to be effective in the Philippine context; it must continue to guide all the evangelization initiatives for the next many decades and even centuries. The Philippine Church constantly seeks to listen to “what the Spirit is saying to the Churches” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

**Conclusion.** Undeniably, the most significant local event of recent years was the January 15-19, 2015 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.”

---

**James H. Kroeger, MM**, has served mission in Asia (Philippines and Bangladesh) since 1970, working in parishes and serving mostly in the education-formation apostolate of seminarians, catechists, and lay leaders. Currently he teaches Christology, Ecclesiology, Missiology, and “Asian Theology” at Loyola School of Theology, East Asian Pastoral Institute, and Mother of Life Catechetical Center in Metro Manila. He has written extensively on Asian (FABC) and Philippine theology, mission, interfaith dialogue, and on the Second Vatican Council. His recent books include: *Go, Teach, Make Disciples* (CBCP-ECM and PMS-Philippines), *Exploring the Priesthood with Pope Francis* (ST PAULS – Manila); *Telling the San Jose Story: Historical Perspectives* (San Jose Seminary Alumni Association – Manila); *Becoming Missionary Disciples* (PMS – Manila); *A Vatican II Journey: Fifty Milestones and Walking in the Light of Faith* (ST PAULS – Manila); and *The Gift of Mission* (Orbis Books – Maryknoll, New York). He may be contacted at: [jhkroeger@gmail.com](mailto:jhkroeger@gmail.com)