



## The Past, a Door to the Future: Reflections for the Journey

The conditions brought by Covid-19 might be with us for a while, so the Church has to reflect and examine itself about what its role is going to be in the years ahead, perhaps in view of 2065, the 5<sup>th</sup> Centenary of the start of evangelization proper with the arrival of the Augustinians in 1565. For this reason, more than ever, there is the need for prayer and contemplation to make the local Church - both servant-leaders and the rest of the faithful - more open to listening to the Lord, to each other and to society, to arrive at an adequate response and programs for translating the response into action.

If the Church will be relevant as God's presence in the world, it has to shed the trappings of power and triumphalism and be the servant according to the spirit of the Beatitudes: a Church of the poor, for the poor and with the poor = not just the economically poor, but everyone who is in some state or form of dependency. It has to advocate seriously the issues involving justice, peace and the defense of the environment. This will be a great demand on the institutional Church (that's all of us), that will hope not to hear one day the words of the Savior: "I was hungry



and thirsty, imprisoned and sick, homeless and naked and you did not feed, give a drink, visit, give a home and dress me, because what you did not do to any of the least of my brothers and sisters, you did not do to me” (Mt 25: 42-45).

Evangelization is an on-going reality. Even after the people have been evangelized, their growth in the understanding and appreciation of their faith has to be revealed in all aspects of life. The realization that today, the practice of the faith for many is “seasonal,” compartmentalized and faith itself has not permeated the whole person and society, with a double-standard morality is a challenge to the whole local Church, so that the path that the new evangelization has to travel becomes unsure. This is where much prayer and contemplation will be needed both by the servant-leaders and the laity, to be able to undertake the path of a true Gospel-oriented community, a symbol of courage and hope for the people and even for the country at large. The testimony of the life of every baptized will make the true Christian a “light of the world and salt of the earth” (Mt 5:13-15).

## POPE FRANCIS ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In an interview by Fr. Gerald O’Connell last April 30, 2020, *Pope Francis shares his vision for Covid-19*, the Vatican Dispatch mentioned that, since Covid-19 is a virus, the Pope proposed “the antibodies of the solidarity due to the Holy Spirit.” We must “join the entire human family in the search for sustainable and integral development. For better or for worse, all our actions affect others, because everything is connected in our common home, and if the health authorities order that we remain confined to our homes, it is the people who make this possible, aware of their responsibility in stopping the pandemic.” Referring to our concern for others, he suggests that “we respond with hope, faith and charity to the call to help others” ...with “a new imagination of what is possible,” through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Pope Francis asked five questions: “(1) Are we capable of acting responsibly in the face of the hunger, suffering by so many in our world where there is, in fact, food for all? (2) Will we continue looking the other way in the face of wars fueled by the (quest for) domination and power? (3) Are we willing to change our style of life that submerges so many in poverty, by promoting and encouraging a more austere and human lifestyle that makes possible a more equitable sharing of resources? (4) Will we adopt as an international community the necessary measures to stop the devastation of the environment, or will we continue to deny the evidence (of this devastation)? (5) Will the globalization of indifference continue threatening and tempting our journey?”

The Pope’s October 3, 2020, Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, on “Fraternity and Social Friendship,” based on St. Francis’ spirituality on universal brotherhood, calls on us to respond as a family. If we are to be more faithful to our Franciscan charism on prayer and contemplation, we can find God’s message in everything that happens to us and around us, as we cultivate the theology of caring proposed by the encyclical.

## THE FRANCISCAN PERSPECTIVE VIS-À-VIS THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

With the new evangelization re-proposed by the CBCP in *Missio ad Gentes* and in the theme GIFTED TO GIVE for the closing of the 5<sup>th</sup> Centenary in April 2022, there is also a need for the Franciscans of today to bring in our perspective and new direction given by the General Definitory. Like the Alcantarine Franciscans, whose perspective was adopted by the 1521 first Synod of Manila regarding the practices the friars had already agreed upon to be executed in the areas assigned to them for evangelization, we can bring our particular vision and approach in implementing the general norms and directives on the new evangelization.

Furthermore, we are to be generous and open in sharing with other groups whatever perspectives or programs we may have that are practical and/or practicable. As always, we have been able to make up for our “lack” of supposed intellectual and even academic expertise by our practical, pastoral and personal approach. Here are a few ideas to reflect on.

In the context of the new evangelization, we can find inspiration in the 1<sup>st</sup> Letter of John where he mentions that his testimony about what he proclaims is what he has heard, seen and touched (1 Jn 1: 1-4). He affirmed that he heard the Lord because he listened to him not just what the Lord said, but what he has contemplated in his life for decades until he wrote his Gospel and letters; that he has seen the deeds of the Lord, the miracles that he mentioned and described in his Gospel, and that he has touched him in the three years of the Lord’s public ministry, where he was the beloved disciple, who witnessed his transfiguration, his miracles, leaned on the Lord’s chest at the Last Supper (Jn 13:25), and was with him on Calvary. He was so beloved that it was to him that the Lord entrusted his mother (Jn 19: 26-27), and was one of the first witnesses of the Risen Lord when he and Peter went to the tomb to verify the resurrection (Jn 20: 2-8).

#### *a. Perhaps We Can Start with the Evangelizer*

With what was just mentioned, the evangelizer has also to experience “hearing, seeing and touching” the Lord through prayer and contemplation as a pre-requisite of his proclamation of the Good News. This task that is analogous to what John mentioned about his experience with the Master, obviously involves not merely an academic activity, but a spiritual experience of conversion and growth in one’s personal relationship with the Lord. This can be achieved only through a deep spiritual life of prayer and contemplation. There is no other way to go around this other than the direct and personal relationship with and love for the Lord.

Personal witness is foremost, as the Franciscans of today know in their tradition, cf. Chapter XVI of the *Regula non-Bullata*, which did not have the papal seal (the so-called *Bulla*) of approval, because the friars in their 1221 General Chapter did not approve it; and St. Francis had to write a shorter version which was approved by Honorius III on November 29, 1223. This personal testimony is to be the result of an ongoing *metanoia*, a transformation of a person's total outlook addressed to God and the fulfillment of his will and promotion of his Kingdom. This has been the direction for the Franciscan Order given by the Minister General and Definitory from the General Chapter of July this year. The friars are reminded that *“the witness of one's life, or the silent proclamation of the kingdom of God, is a kind of an initial step and the first method of evangelization. It can and must be given by all the friars, clerics and lay, by those who preach, pray or “work”, by the young and the old, by the healthy and the sick...”* (GG.CC. 89,1).

Furthermore, there is a need for them to acknowledge the Five Invitations from the 2021 General Chapter, and to reflect on their implications and consequences to their total life as Friars Minors today: (1) the invitation to GRATITUDE, (2) the invitation to PENANCE AND CONVERSION, (3) the invitation to MISSION AND EVANGELIZATION, (4) the invitation to RENEWING OUR VISION, and (5) the invitation to EMBRACE OUR FUTURE. It is interesting to note that this call is coming, not only from their new Servant Leaders but also from our local Church with the themes of the 5<sup>th</sup> Centenary and the already mentioned Pope Francis' new vision for the Church with the Synod of Synodality activities leading to the Synod of Bishops in October 2023.

Not enough can be said to stress the importance of this in evangelization, except to bear in mind that evangelization has what may be considered two wings: the active work of bringing the Good News to people and the contemplative dimension that nurtures the activity through the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The two wings must work in harmony, because

without the contemplative dimension, the activity can be just another form of propaganda. It is also good to remember that the missions have two Patron Saints: an active Jesuit missionary, St. Francis Xavier, and a contemplative cloistered Carmelite nun, St. Therese of the Child Jesus.

Just as important as the spiritual life is the evangelizer's total well-being. Jesus already died once and for all; nobody can duplicate that, so the evangelizer will do what he/she can. Even after the first mission of the apostles, Jesus told them to rest, relax (Mk 6:30-34). Persons involved in evangelization are not machines and they have their breaking point, which incidentally, even machines have. Simply put, the evangelizer should seriously try to develop a healthy lifestyle, that he/she a break once in a while, and return to the ministry refreshed.

Since people are not the same in their needs and capacities to cope with stress and anxieties, failure and burn-out, etc., those actively involved in evangelization need to learn to look after each other, help one another, support and not compete with one another. Nowhere is it mentioned that evangelization is a contest, so let them show in the concrete that they truly care for each other. May their superiors (and bishops) be aware of this responsibility towards their co-workers in the Lord's harvest.

#### *b. Rediscover the Concrete Implications of the Sacrament of Baptism*

In connection with the 5<sup>th</sup> Centenary of Christianity when we celebrate the first baptisms held in our country on Easter Sunday, 1521, this sacrament should be made the foundation of the new evangelization, together with catechesis and effective liturgies related to the other sacraments. Thus, might be a good program for the new evangelization that those in the pastoral ministry be more conscientious in celebrating the sacrament of baptism through a more precise, incisive way, and the pre-baptismal instructions being conducted with interest, etc., underlining the fundamental importance of the sacrament, to rediscover its power and implications in the life of the Church and of the Christians.

It has already been pointed out decades ago in studies on Filipino religiosity that it is “seasonal,” “devotional,” and with a double-standard morality. This is a result of having what has been referred to as a split-level Christianity, that generally finds its concrete example in the 45 minutes spent in Church on Sundays with no, or little, repercussion on the concrete life of the person concerning his spiritual, professional and moral aspects in the areas of his/her daily life. This was also pointed out in the reflections of the Year of Faith of the nine-year novena that started in 2012 in preparation for the 5<sup>th</sup> Centenary.

The *National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines*, approved by the Congregation for the Clergy in 2007, is an important source for the renewal of faith and practices, as it has a well-explained content of a catechesis proposed for this country. The insights, founded on a general native mindset, are a good starting point in discussing the new evangelization. We cannot give or share what we do not have. There are also the 1982 and 1985 editions of the Catechetical Directory mentioned above; the *Filipino Family Growing in the Faith* (1983); *The Catechists’ Basic Formation Program* (1992); *Catholic Faith Catechism* (1989-1993); *Catechism for Filipino Catholics* (1997) and the Tagalog version *Katesismo para sa mga Pilipinong Katoliko* (2000); and *The New Catechetical Directory of the Philippines* (2008).

### c. *New Initiatives, New Forms, New Challenges*

New initiatives must learn to use modern technology. Pope Francis’ photos of him kissing a sick child or washing the feet of a Moslem woman one Holy Thursday went viral and spoke volumes. The sacraments are to be administered in a more meaningful way, not just in being liturgically correct, but with a more personal approach, yet maintaining the decorum and without making the rite or the celebration as something merely casual. It is not enough to be aware of what technology and social media can do in values formation, but they should be used for and in evangelization as well.

The new way of evangelizing is proactive with initiatives involving prayer and reflection, experimentation, revisions and periodic evaluation. Criticisms are important for the growth and for the programs and initiatives to be validated. The process is not carved on stone as it were, but is a living, developing, adapting reality and is multi-sectoral. The hierarchy, clergy, religious and laity will come up with principles based on the Scriptures, papal documents, scientific studies, etc. All sectors in the community will be involved because all constitute the Mystical Body of Christ. The Holy Spirit is not the monopoly only of the hierarchy, clergy or religious.

The Alcantarine Franciscans' holistic approach to evangelization may serve as an example. They started by exploring the area and studying the people and their needs, eventually encouraging them to form towns, to facilitate pastoral work, catechesis and follow-up instructions. Their approach is still relevant today, with the challenge for the evangelizer to go to the peripheries, particularly the poorest of the poor, know their needs, and together with them, come up with solutions that are doable, etc.

#### *d. Let the Group Prioritize Its Specific Advocacies or Charisms*

This is understandable as a starting point obviously because the group is familiar with their advocacies. The all-embracing *Pro-Life* advocacy includes the protection of all life in all its manifestations, including the promotion of Justice and Peace and everything related (e.g., Human rights, red-tagging, police brutality, trumped-up charges against enemies or critics of the administration, Extra-Judicial Killings, etc.) The Franciscan ministry today, for example, should be at the forefront in the movements concerning the protection of the environment.

What programs and initiatives do the Order and the rest of the Franciscan family in the country have in their schools, parishes and institutions on this? How do they celebrate Earth Day, or the Season of Creation, or St. Francis, Patron of Ecology? While the



celebrations just mentioned may be an invitation to a greater awareness regarding the defense of the environment, a more serious consciousness regarding Global Warming has to be studied and promoted in the Franciscan family and not limit itself to mere token gestures like tree-planting and cleaning of waterways once a year.

Many countries recorded unprecedented flooding and the hottest summer this year 2021. Scientists predict that the sea level will continue to rise to 10 feet by the year 2050, though the effects will be felt already by 2030.<sup>1</sup> Manila is one of the 250 cities. The rising of the sea level will affect some 60% of our population.<sup>2</sup>

With the prediction of the sea level having risen 10 feet by 2050, and will supposedly just continue to rise even more in the years following, Malaysia and Indonesia have supposedly started to move their government offices to higher grounds, the USA has started the construction of a retaining wall around Manhattan, and so on. What precautions are we taking regarding our structures and communities along the coasts, for example, like the Province's renewal center in Zambales, or the Custody's Franciscan retirement community in Minglanilla, Cebu, where construction has been started for a multi-storey building for the sick and elderly, the archives, and where the Postulancy is also located? However, with regard to ourselves and our communities, how do we intend to cope with such calamities, even if for now we might consider them "unlikely." The year 2050 is within the life span of many friars living today.

After the devastation brought by typhoon Odette (International name Rai) just before Christmas 2021, we read that "Scientists have long warned that typhoons are becoming more powerful and strengthening more rapidly as the world becomes

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Philippine Daily Inquirer, *Too Late: Global Heating has Arrived – UN Report*, (August 10, 2021), B3; Von Katindoy, "We've been Repeatedly" in *Commentary, Philippine Daily Inquirer* (August 13, 2021), A9.

<sup>2</sup> cf. Jhesset O. Enano, "Urban poor first to suffer as rising seas threaten to remap Metro" in *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (September 25, 2021), A9.

warmer because of human-driven climate change. The Philippines—ranked as one of the most vulnerable countries to the impact of climate change—is hit by an average of 20 typhoons every year, which typically wipe out harvests, homes and infrastructure in already impoverished areas.”<sup>3</sup> By the end of the year when the typhoon has left, the number of dead or missing was 400+.

A suggestion after the 26<sup>th</sup> Conference of Parties (COP) of the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, UK, Oct. 31 – Nov. 13, 2021, has specific implications: “In the Philippines, forest and mangrove resources are just a fraction of what they used to be five decades ago. Our marine resources and corals have been degraded by coastal development and destructive fishing... Our overconsumption is marked by great waste. Food production, for instance, is ironically considered the greatest threat to nature as it accounts for about 70% loss in biodiversity, 24% of total greenhouse gas emissions, and the use of 69% of our freshwater resources. And still, we waste 33% of the food that it produces.

“Ocean plastic pollution is another great problem. The Philippines ranks as the third biggest polluter in the world, after China and Indonesia. Plastics are considered the “new coal.” The US plastic industry accounts for at least 232 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub>e gas emissions per year, equivalent to 116 average-size coal-fired power plants. We tend to believe recycling is the solution, but recycling also emits greenhouse gases and air pollution.

“A better way of recycling is reducing consumption. As ordinary citizens, let us be conscious of our ways and waste. Every move counts; the lesser we consume, the better for the planet. Let us reduce and go back to basics...”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Allison Jackson, Cecil Morella, “Death Toll from Philippines Typhoon Passes 20,” *The Edition* (accessed 18 December 2021). See <https://edition.mv/news/23554>.

<sup>4</sup> cf. Jose Angelito Palma [a sustainability consultant], “COP26 Outcomes and our Collective Response” in Commentary, *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (December 1, 2021), A8.

Along with the above is the importance of dialogue, already expressed in the 1970s by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), and was the theme for 2020 in the nine-year novena leading to 2021: *Ecumenism, Inter-Religious Dialogue and the Indigenous Peoples*. Dialogue in all levels is the new direction in the Church shown in the initiatives of Pope Francis, founded on the truth that we are all God's children, redeemed by Christ, and destined to be with God forever. These ideas and their practical and practicable consequences are spelled out in the pope's encyclicals *Laudato Si* and *Fratelli Tutti* of 2015 and 2019 respectively.

The 2016 Chapter of the Franciscan Custody of St. Anthony anticipated the need for Dialogue by coming up with *A Statement on the Common Understanding of Dialogue*, not only in its application in the inter-religious context but also as applied to the poor and the indigenous peoples in the Visayas and Mindanao, which involves, in addition, our "dialogue" with Creation. Documents and Statements, however, do not automatically become part of life in the religious Order, unless they are integrated in the formation programs, both in the initial stages and in on-going formation.

*e. If One Believes in the Good News, One Proclaims it with Joy*

Joy has to be an integral attitude of the evangelizer. Pope Francis, a Jesuit himself, challenged consecrated persons to live their vocation with joy. Future priests, religious and prospective evangelizers should learn the theology of laughter, even as poverty and simplicity are internalized in their lifestyle. People were drawn to Jesus, to St. Francis of Assisi, St. Philip Neri, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Francis de Sales and St. John Bosco among others, because they radiated joy.

Their unthreatening ways put people at ease. “Our lives may be the only Gospel some people will read,” said St. Teresa of Calcutta. Even with all the requirements having been complied with, the evangelizer knows that the results do not depend on personal efforts. This is the work of the Lord and the laborer works for him, doing their best and leaving the results to God, which might not even be seen in the evangelizer’s lifetime. One has to trust in the Lord’s promise for him to be always the Emmanuel (Mt 28:20); it is God who decides about the outcome of the enterprise.

### POPE FRANCIS FOLLOWS THE FOOTSTEPS OF NAMESAKE ST. FRANCIS

This piece on Pope Francis’ wanting a Church according to the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi is a relevant and permanent challenge to all evangelizers, but particularly to those who profess the saint’s values and spirituality. “Pope Francis made a pilgrimage on Friday, October 4, 2013, to the hillside town of Assisi and the tomb of his namesake, St. Francis, the 13<sup>th</sup>-century friar, who renounced a wealthy, dissolute lifestyle to embrace a life of poverty and minister to the most destitute. St. Francis was famously told by God to “repair my house.” In word and deed, the first pope to name himself after St. Francis has made clear how he wants to follow that command, with a church that is welcoming to all, but especially the most marginalized, and a church hierarchy that is worthy of its 1.2 billion flocks. Here are some of his main goals as he attempts to achieve the church St. Francis would have wanted.

#### *A Church that is Poor and for the Poor*

“On October 4, 2013 (feast of St. Francis of Assisi) Pope Francis had lunch with the poor being cared for by a Catholic charity in Assisi. Since becoming pope, Francis has made it clear that one of his principal objectives is a church that is humble, that looks out for the poorest and brings them hope. The ‘slum pope,’ as he is known because of his work in Argentina’s shantytowns,

denounced big business' 'idolatry' of money and sought to encourage those without the 'dignity' of work. The following was and is his vision of the Church today.

#### *A Church that Welcomes Anyone, Including Non-believers*

“At his first public audience a few days after his election (in 2013), Francis made an unusual exception: in recognition that not all in the room were Christians or even believers, Francis offered a blessing without the traditional Catholic formula or gesture, saying he would bless each one in silence ‘respecting your conscience, but knowing that each one of you is a child of God.’ That respect for people of different faiths or no faith at all has become a hallmark of Francis's papacy as he actively seeks out atheists for dialogue. (In 2019, on the 8th centenary of St. Francis’ encounter with the Sultan in Damietta, Egypt, Pope Francis attended encounters with Moslem religious leaders in Morocco and the Middle East.)

#### *A Church that Doesn't Judge*

“The pope’s “who am I to judge” comment about gays represented a radical shift in tone for the Vatican. Yes, Catholic teaching holds that gays should be treated with dignity and respect, so Francis was making no change in doctrine. But Church teaching also holds that gay acts are ‘intrinsically disordered’ – a point Francis has neglected to emphasize. This refusal to judge applies to just about anyone Francis encounters, including drug addicts and convicts. He has brought a simple message that they are loved and deserve to be loved.

#### *A Church that is 'Messy' and Goes Outside the Sacristy*

“Francis told pilgrims from Argentina during World Youth Day in July 2013 to make a ‘mess’ in their dioceses and shake things up, even if it means irritating their bishops. He wanted to convey his hope that the Church would stop being so inward-looking, and instead go out to the peripheries to spread the

faith. Francis' first trip outside Rome was to Lampedusa, an island closer to Africa than the Italian mainland. The last-minute trip was organized after several boat migrants drowned. Francis' eulogy for all migrants lost at sea denounced a 'globalization of indifference.' It was a prescient message given the shipwreck off Lampedusa that October that killed scores of migrants.

#### *A Church that Isn't Stuck in the Past or Obsessed with Rules*

"Francis has made clear he cares little for the old Latin Mass and has disparaged Catholics still very much attached to it. He has forbidden one religious order from celebrating the pre-Vatican II liturgy without specific authority, seemingly rolling back the 2007 decree signed by Benedict XVI allowing for its wider celebration. More well-known is his disagreement with the Church's 'small-minded rules,' saying too many Catholics were focusing on them. Rather, he wants the Church to focus on mercy.

#### *A Church that is reformed*

"Francis was elected on a mandate to reform the Church and he has set about doing that, perhaps with St. Francis' 'repair my house' instruction in mind. Soon after his election, he had meetings with advisers helping him rewrite the main blueprint for how the Catholic Church is governed. Ideas include a 'moderator' to make the Vatican bureaucracy run more smoothly and a revised role for the powerful Secretary of State. It also includes involving men and women more in the life of the Church. Just as St. Francis wanted."<sup>5</sup> It is noted that since the start of his papacy in 2013, Pope Francis has consistently pursued these goals with energy and good spirit in his travels and statements.

"... In an interview soon after his election to the papacy in 2013, he said that 'he sees the Church as a field hospital after battle,' (or, in our condition today, like a hospital overflowing with

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<sup>5</sup> Quote taken from Associated Press (AP) published in *SunStar Cebu* (Sunday, October 6, 2013), B11.

Covid-19 patients, or like an evacuation center, filled with people whose homes and lives have been devastated by natural calamities, like what typhoon Odette [International name Rai] inflicted in our country just as we were starting the *Simbang Gabi*, the Dawn Masses, in preparation for Christmas 2021.)

“The pope’s vision is that of “a pastoral ... church ... toward ministry to and embrace of the poor, the spiritually broken and the lonely.” Expanding this from Pope St. Paul VI’s 1975 *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, he says, “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty, because it has been out in the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and clinging to its own security.” He made it clear that he does not want just talk ... he wants “actual transformation” (cf. *Civiltá Catolica* interview of September 2013).

#### THE CHALLENGE OF “A CHURCH ACCORDING TO THE GOSPEL”

The Latin American theologian José Antonio Pagola made this reflection based on Mt 5, 3–20, where the presentation of the *Beatitudes* is different from Luke’s, because “he traces the lines that should characterize Jesus’ followers. That’s where its importance lies for us in these times when the Church needs to go about finding her appropriate way of living in the midst of a secularized society. It is not possible to put forth Jesus’ Good News in just any old way. The *Beatitudes* spell out the spirit that must inspire the way that the Church will put into practice as she travels on pilgrimage to the Father. We need to listen to the *Beatitudes* with an attitude of personal and communal conversion. This is the only way we can walk toward the future.

“Blessed is the Church that is poor in spirit and has a simple heart, that acts without dominance or arrogance, without wealth or splendor, but sustained only by Jesus’ humble authority. Of her is God’s kingdom.

“Blessed is the Church that cries with those who cry, and suffers as she is stripped of privileges and power, since she can better share the fate of those who have lost all, thereby sharing Christ’s destiny. One day she will be consoled by God.

“Blessed is the Church that is meek and renounces imposing herself by force, coercion or subjection, always practicing the gentleness of her Lord and Master. She will one day inherit the Promised Land.

“Blessed is the Church that has hunger and thirst for justice within herself and for the whole world, since she will seek her own conversion and work for a more just and dignified life for everyone, starting with the least. Her longing will be satisfied by God.

“Blessed is the Church that practices compassion, that renounces rigorism and prefers mercy rather than sacrifice, as she welcomes sinners and doesn’t hide the Good News from them. She will receive mercy from God.

“Blessed is the Church of pure hearts and transparent conduct that doesn’t cover up her sins or promote secrecy or ambiguity, as she walks in the truth of Jesus. One day she will see God.

“Blessed is the Church that works for peace and struggles against wars, who unites hearts and sows concord, as she spreads the peace of Jesus which the world cannot give. She will be a child of God.

“Blessed is the Church that suffers hostility and persecution on account of justice without fleeing martyrdom, as she learns how to mourn with victims and comes to know the cross of Jesus. The kingdom of God is hers.

“Today’s society needs to know Christian communities marked by the spirit of the *Beatitudes*. Only a Gospel Church has authority and credibility to show the face of Jesus to the men and women of today.”



## AN INCLUSIVE CELEBRATION TO END THE 5<sup>TH</sup> CENTENARY

Being consistent with the Franciscans' inclusive perspective with regard to evangelization in its comprehensive meaning according to their tradition, and as supported by the current spirit of dialogue that Pope Francis has brought to the Church, it is understandable consequently to envision the closing of the 5<sup>th</sup> Centenary to have a more inclusive perspective, which, incidentally is also already implied in the 2012 CBCP document mentioned earlier.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Centenary does not commemorate the evangelization of the country that officially started in 1565, 44 years after 1521, but rather only the arrival of Christianity, as mentioned in the "Theme launched for 500<sup>th</sup> year of Christianity" (The *Philippine Star*, November 29, 2020, p.1). There are no records of the kind of preparation or orientation the supposedly hundreds of natives received before they were baptized, as it is almost impossible to picture the situation. Also, no records show how the baptism was followed through, as the priest who did the mass baptism returned to Spain after Magellan's death. Therefore, no matter how hard we try to stretch our imagination to picture the practice of Christianity in those 44 years between 1521 and 1565, we are faced with many questions.

What is historically certain is that 2021 only commemorates the coming of Christianity with the Mass in Limasawa and the baptisms in Cebu. Thus, a new dimension could be given to the celebration, which could be the *Birth of the Filipino Nation*. This does not say we were a nation in 1521, but it marked the beginning of what would in time become the Filipino nation, because the coming of Magellan introduced us to the rest of the world and eventually enriched us with the growth of Christianity, and the influences of the West.

This idea is based on our own practice. Why are we celebrating the mere fact of our birth when it would still take a couple of decades before we mature? So, if we celebrate our birthdays, why can we not celebrate the birthday of our nation in 1521? The inclusive aspect in the celebration of the Birth of our nation is implied in the image of the Santo Niño itself, the icon that symbolizes that birth. The birth of the Lord was inclusive in that it did not only focus on what happened on Christmas eve, but the event also brought in the angels, the shepherds, Herod, the Wise Men from outside Israel, the slaughter of the innocents and the flight into Egypt. Furthermore, there were other events related to 1521 that are worth commemorating as well.

The exclusive focus on the events of 1521 – the coming of Magellan, the first Mass and baptisms, the Battle of Mactán, the start of evangelization in 1565 and the rest – can make us oblivious to the "dream" that brought all of those about. That dream was the desire to get to the East Indies (present Indonesia) for the much-coveted spices, as well as for gold and silver, through a western route, and back to Europe going the opposite way, an enterprise undertaken by Magellan that lasted from 1519 to 1522. This resulted in an unprecedented first voyage around the world, a feat that changed history forever. This background is much too precious to leave out.

Aside from this historical background that began our having been “discovered” by the west, with the consequences that have happened with countries that have been colonized at one time or another in their history, with the accompanying advantages and disadvantages, the inclusive spirit of the 5<sup>th</sup> Centennial will include the influences and contributions of other cultures, beliefs, etc. before the coming of Spain, which contributed to the making of the Filipino identity. It is tendentious that some quarters speak of colonization as if we were the only country that suffered such a fate. Colonization was practiced from the dawn of history and enriched nations and cultures, developed civilization and the rest.

This inclusive view of the celebration does not diminish the role played by Christianity, because it was precisely through the work of the missionaries that the 7,000+ islands were brought together, even though there had been pockets of resistance through the years, but they were against the civil administration. The almost unbelievable success of the missionaries has made the evangelization of the Philippines one of the most unique in the history of the missions because most of the work done in other countries did not involve an archipelago of thousands of islands.

Disdain for the work of the missionaries and any kind of violence against them were exceptions to the general gratitude of the natives. This is not to say that all the missionaries were saints, but only to see the negative is just as bad. The negative perceptions and incidents were instigated by the anti-clerical movements of the late 1800s that led to the revolution of 1896. Unfortunately, something of this attitude is still with us, the desire to rewrite history through a dubious revisionism to make power and politics prevail over the common good of our people.

In the spirit of dialogue, the inclusive celebration will make us acknowledge the influence of our indigenous peoples, the original inhabitants of these islands, and even that of Islam that came in 1380 with the first mosque in Tawi-Tawi constructed by the Arab missionary Sheik Karimul Makhdum and propagated Islam in the surrounding islands, as well as the contributions to our culture by the trading partners from China, India, Cambodia, Indonesia and Borneo. If we cannot have this open spirit now which can be deduced in the signs of the times, particularly through the pandemic, and the spirit that Pope Francis has awakened in our world, we might have failed to read the signs of the times with regard to the fuller meaning of the 5<sup>th</sup> Centenary.

An inclusive celebration is implied in “Gifted to Give,” the theme of the 5<sup>th</sup> Centenary. It is a more open and reconciliatory theme that reminds us of “gift.” This is the image of the food packs, the amelioration fund, the *ayuda*, the giving in these months of

Covid-19 and in the time of calamities and poverty. “Giving” is not only a more universal and inclusive concept; it is also a more attractive and realistic image of God, the Giver of all gifts, which our ancestors acknowledged in the goodness of *Bathala*.

How significant and a beautiful testimony it would be if, like what St. John Paul II did on October 27, 1986, when he invited leaders of world religions to come to Assisi, and pray together for peace, we can do the same with our civic and religious leaders, representatives from the world of business, academe, entertainment, politics, including our brothers and sisters from the mountains, giving them safe passage, our indigenous peoples, movements promoting good governance and the environment, etc., to come to Cebu for the closing of the 5<sup>th</sup> Centenary in 2022, to pray together for peace and unity to promote the good of every citizen of this land.

May the words of Pope Francis in the introduction to his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* inspire and challenge us: “By ourselves we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together. Let us dream then as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all.”

## AN ATTEMPT TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE PAST

As I reflect on the future, there is one question about the missionaries that would not leave me: what made them come? Spain was having its *Edad de Oro* (Golden Age), in world domination and grandeur with the wealth of the new world making it one of the great powers of that period, both in material glory as well as in the spiritual aspect, with the great saints of that time: Teresa de Avila, Juan de la Cruz, Ignacio de Loyola and Francisco Javier, Pedro de Alcántara, Pedro Bautista, and the numerous saints of the missions. As soon as the Augustinians came

in 1565, two of them, fray Andrés de Urdaneta and a companion friar immediately took the galleon back to Spain to recruit more missionaries.

The Alcantarine Franciscans who followed in 1578, sent fray Francisco de Sta. Maria back in 1580 to do the same. Those who returned to Spain soon after their arrival to recruit more missionaries did not have much of an experience to share with those they wanted to recruit, other than the horrors of the voyage: nine to ten months going, and the same coming back. They had not seen much of the place or of the people.

What they saw, however, were the possibilities, the future of these islands not only from the point of view of wealth, but of spiritual conquests for the Gospel. Yes, that, and perhaps tucked in their heart somewhere, the desire for martyrdom. There was also the spirit and energy of the Council of Trent (1545-1563), which was called among other things to rally the Catholics to go and find more members since some countries of central Europe have become protestants. The decrees of that Council were accepted by Spain for implementation in 1564. The decrees were then shared with her colonies so that when Legazpi and the first Augustinians came in 1565, they must already had some idea about how the decrees of the Council were to be implemented in the country.

The Jesuits arrived in 1581, the Dominicans in 1587, and the Augustinian Recollects in 1606. For the missionaries, coming to the islands was cutting themselves off from the grandeur and prosperity of Europe to start in a land that, in their eyes, was left behind by time, that could not be compared to their organized cities, with towering cathedrals, universities and such structures. And yet, they came and stayed, suffering the climate and humidity, the naturalistic culture of the natives, the contrast between the gentle oriental personality and the affirmative and stronger western counterpart. Most of all, many of them would never see their land or loved ones again. The courage, love for

adventure, and their capacity to adjust to new situations, and everything that it implied will always be a source of admiration and an example to those who would come after them.

The missionaries' original energy and fervor shown in the first decades might have waned in time as what usually happens. The original charism and fervor cools down, are modified and they evolve in time as conditions change and routine sets in. To generalize about the life of the missionaries in the first centuries would be unfair. It is not realistic to expect them to have maintained their spirituality and missionary zeal all throughout the Spanish colonial rule from 1565 to the Revolution of 1896. On the other hand, it is also possible to presume that there has always been the constant effort to be faithful.

Following the ups and downs of history and life in general, it can be affirmed legitimately that the original fervor would return every now and then to help evaluate behaviors and renew responses to the original charism. This is an important consideration to be made, as these aspects of life are generally affected by changes in civil administration, economics, new ideas and ideologies, and other developments in the life of the people. It is thus unfair to condemn the past only for the wrongs perceived and be judged according to the categories of the present and the greater awareness with regard to governance, human rights and such concepts that have been developed through the centuries and the consequences of two world wars, the atrocities committed, the developments in the behavioral sciences and technology, etc.

History is a two-edged weapon: it can kill in the hand of a psycho or it can heal like the scalpel in the hand of a surgeon. People generally fear or make fun of things they do not understand, and history is one of them, perhaps because what they have learned from the past was not history, but discrimination, prejudice and injustices. True history is truth. The Jews, the Christians, the Moslems, and indeed, all cultures celebrate history

through their feasts. Even on a personal basis, we celebrate birthdays and anniversaries, sometimes even the trivial ones, just to have an occasion to promote unity, because of the meaning such events have brought to our lives.

While Jorge Santayana's words, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it" refer to the mistakes and wrongs done, the statement is also true about the positive and the good that has been accomplished, so that succeeding generations would have something to emulate, or even surpass. This was one of the reasons behind the celebration of the 5<sup>th</sup> Centenary of Christianity: to sort out the good and the not good, to renew and develop the first and to study how to avoid the second. This is easier said than done because it depends on how one views and lives history. In particular, history has shown that quite often those who hold power have not always promoted the common good, but rather self-serving interests and the growth of political dynasties. Historical revisionism is getting common that we hardly notice it anymore. For example, is our National Anthem "historically revisionist," as it only stresses the revolutions and uprisings, love for country and its natural surroundings pleasant to the eyes?

The importance of knowing the languages of history is crucial to its understanding and interpretation: Semitic languages for the Bible, Spanish for us and Italian for Franciscan sources, etc. Celebrating the past is not just to brag about accomplishments, as it is also recognizing the part of the Lord in the destiny of nations, as well as to seek healing and forgiveness for the mistakes which are not to be judged with the categories of the present. Rather, we look at the mistakes of the past with mercy, with the resolve not to repeat them.

We hope the future will also judge us with the same mercy and compassion. People who do not understand the past tend to be harsh and see it only from their optic often colored by ideologies

and such so that they unwittingly suggest some degree or form of historical revisionism. As the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-1961) said, “For all that has been, thank you. For all that is to come, yes.” For lessons learned, we give thanks; and yes to what lies ahead, as positive attitudes can make things new.