



The Inclusive Celebration of the 5th Centenary in 2022: Its Meaning and Implications

ABSTRACT

This is a personal reflection on the 5th centenary of the coming of Christianity. When we speak of the Spanish colonial period, we deplore only the negative effects that we have been programmed by anti-Catholic and anti-clerical ideologies to believe. Colonization was not unique to us; it has happened in world history from the start of civilization: with the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans, the countries of Europe, and down the line. Most if not all, were colonized, then they became powerful, that they became colonizers. The 5th centenary celebrates the Coming of Christianity, the birth of Christianity, and like all births, it has to be seen also in its inclusive aspect, from a broader perspective, including the influences and elements that have come before 1521.

Keywords: Birth; Colonization; Inclusive; Holistic; Universal; Reconciliation

THE PLANNING

The plans for the event were made in 2012, by the Most Rev. Jose S. Palma, D.D., President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), and Archbishop of Cebu, the epicenter of the celebration, in a Pastoral Letter on the Era of



New Evangelization: "LIVE CHRIST, SHARE CHRIST" (Looking Forward to Our Five Hundredth: 'Go and make disciples...' *Mt. 28:19*).

The opening paragraph states that "on March 16, 2021, the fifth centenary of the coming of Christianity... we remember with thanksgiving the first Mass... celebrated on Easter Sunday, March 31..., the baptism of Rajah Humabon who was given the Christian name Carlos and his wife Hara Amihan who was baptized Juana in 1521."

It is claimed that "hundreds" were supposedly baptized, but who was there to count? The villages were small then, just a few families, with the head of the barangay, so "hundreds" is in our imagination, to create impact. Later events, however, changed "coming of Christianity" to "Christianization," which has been misleading, because Christianization actually began in 1565 with the coming of Legazpi and the five Augustinians,¹ headed by fray Andres de Urdaneta.

Even if the coming of Magellan and the religious rites that he organized are historic for the history of Christianity in the country, it was only the Coming or Introduction of Christianity that is commemorated, since the purpose of Magellan's voyage was to find a western route to the spice-rich East Indies, the present Indonesia, across the Atlantic, through South America and over the Pacific.

COLONIZATION IS NOT A DIRTY WORD

Colonization has been part of the history of the world from the beginning, as studies of civilizations and empires show. A tribe becomes powerful, and colonizes its neighbors and expands its domain. In due time, the empire collapses due to environmental factors or just another of its colonies has become more powerful and overpowers the source and moves on to do the same. With the

¹The author expresses his thanks to Fr. Ric Anthony Reyes, OSA, for his help in providing historical data regarding the Augustinians.

exception of very primitive tribes still found in the dense jungles somewhere in the planet, most countries have been colonized by others, thus bringing an enrichment to ideas and procedures, languages and arts, flora and fauna, economies, etc., to the colonized people. History shows that there have always been sacrifices, violence, injustices done, uncomfortable and bad as they seem to us today, but that's how they were, and yet, in spite of all that, peoples have survived and eventually flourished. The process of dying and rising have been the standard procedure in history.

So what we went through under Spain was not an experience unique only to us. For some of us, however, only the undesirable practices of colonization stand out. This is why there are sectors who are against the quincennial celebration, even if the wrongs and injustices that keep on being brought up have been acknowledged and forgiveness for them have already been sought. We have to move on, and not allow the anger and guilt to continue to limit our collective growth. It is said that maturity begins when blaming ends.

When Spain's domination ended, however, we accepted to be colonized by another power, America, which did not even acknowledge that it was Spain, predominantly the missionaries in the far-flung areas, who through evangelization brought the different regions and provinces together. Spain did not impose Spanish; but America imposed English. During WW2, Japan also started to teach us Nihongo. Today, we have sectors teaching us the "language" of double talk, hyperbole, fake news, historical revisionism and such in administration, policies and laws, and graft and corruption, which we are constantly bombarded with in the media.

Colonization is still going on, but it is accomplished not any more through war or subjugation of a people, but through globalization, trade, entertainment, mass media, when ideas, values and lifestyles are imported and exported constantly. In fact, Covid-19 may even be considered from this perspective. It is the same dog with a different collar.

THE UNDOCUMENTED 44 YEARS BETWEEN 1521 AND 1565

After the Masses, the baptisms, and the death of Magellan in April 1521, his group left Cebu and docked in other nearby islands, before moving on back to Spain. The priest who did the Masses and baptisms left with them.

Questions have to be asked: How well did the newly baptized understand what was done to them? How did the priest explain baptism and its implications, since he did not speak the native language, and the natives heard Spanish for the first time? There was supposed to have been an interpreter, but how was he able to interpret the theological content of the sacrament, as he did not have basic training in theology. The situation at this time did not have the same elements as the preservation of Christianity in Japan in the same century, where the Jesuits brought Christianity, and when they had to leave, the native Christians continued the practices as best as they could, so that when Japan reopened to the West again, the missionaries found the so-called secret Christians.

The Augustinians who came with Legazpi made no such discovery. Instead of making quick deductions, we ask questions based on the situation of the time. Since nobody in Legazpi's group knew the native language, they had to find ways to learn it fast, so that they could explain to them about the statuette of the Santo Niño, which was found in a hut that was burnt down with the others in the settlement. Did the hut belong to Juana who was baptized in 1521, and to whom the image was given, but who, if alive in 1565, would have been in her 70s? Was the hut perhaps the home of the *babaylan*, the woman who was the natives' connection with their divinities?

What could have happened was that, after the Spaniards left, those baptized in 1521 simply went back to the religious practices, as there was nobody to continue their instructions on the Christian beliefs and practices. The statuette of the Santo Niño could have ended up in the hands of the *babaylan*. In fact, the first description of the religion of the natives was made by one of the

Franciscans who arrived in 1578, fray Juan de Plasencia in his *Las Costumbres de los Indios Tagalos de Filipinas*, written in 1589, almost 70 years after Magellan. Plasencia said that the religion of the natives was based on nature-worship, with their local versions of priests for their pantheon of gods, under a main deity they called *Bathala*. The religious practices of a group could have been copied in the other islands or tribes as the natives were seafarers and trade was common among them.

Legazpi sailed for Manila in 1570. Of the five Augustinians who came with him in 1565, Urdaneta and another returned to Mexico, two remained in Cebu and one went with Legazpi to Manila. On arrival, he made friends with Datu Lakandula and other groups around as well, perhaps remembering what happened to Magellan with LapuLapu, and settled in what later became Intramuros, the seat of the government. Even with more Augustinians arriving, the work of evangelization in the beginning was tedious, until other Orders arrived: Franciscans (1578), Jesuits (1581), Dominicans (1587), Recollects and Brothers of St. John of God (1611). The First Synod of Manila was held in 1581, which decided on how evangelization was to be done.

AN INCLUSIVE, HOLISTIC QUINCENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

"Inclusive" and "holistic" are words not used in daily life, so it is good to understand what the words mean. "Inclusive" means being "broad in orientation or scope; covering or intended to cover all items" and "holistic" or "wholistic" is "related to or concerned with wholes or with complete systems..."

So when these words are made to describe an event like the quincentennial, they mean that other possible aspects are included, even if they may not all be of the same importance or value or effect on the total outcome. Making the celebration inclusive accepts the reality that, even if we are predominantly Catholic, we also have people with other belief systems and religious practices, including those who do not have any, other cultures and

backgrounds before Spain arrived, that have left something to our culture and identity.

Making the celebration inclusive would also show more appreciation for the Indigenous Peoples, the original inhabitants of these islands, that still constitute 10-15% of the population in about 110 ethno-linguistic groups in the archipelago. The 2012 CBCP Pastoral Letter in preparation for the quincentennial missed them among the "nine pastoral priorities of the Church in the Philippines," so that in the theme for 2020, they were added thus: "Ecumenism (and) Inter-Religious Dialogue *and Indigenous Peoples.*"

IMPLICATIONS OF AN INCLUSIVE CELEBRATION

Since the focal point of the quincentennial is not 1565, which is the start of evangelization, but 1521, related to Magellan's "discovery" of the archipelago, there is more than just "the coming of Christianity" to celebrate. There was the success of the voyage (1519-1522) in the circumnavigation of the world, which Magellan started ending in the archipelago, and its eventual consequences for the country, related to Christianity: first Easter Sunday Mass on March 31, 1521, in Limasawa as confirmed by the National Historical Commission, and the baptisms in Cebu on April 14. After Magellan's death in Mactan, the voyage was continued by Elcano, eventually reaching Spain in 1522.

Other expeditions to the Philippines followed, but were unsuccessful, until the 1565 expedition already mentioned. To create a parallel celebration on the quincentennial, there is the movement that focuses on the battle of Mactan and Lapu-Lapu, an event that would not have happened if Magellan had not come.

The outbreak of the pandemic made the CBCP decide to extend the celebration from April 2021 to April 2022, giving more time as well as space to expand the meaning of the event to become more inclusive in the spirit given by Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti*, of opening our minds and hearts to the generosity of God who sent his Son to save all and to enrich our human experience

with the realization that we are all one family, brothers and sisters, which Covid-19 has helped us realize in the many ways that countries, organizations, agencies and individuals have responded to the crisis.

Making the quincentennial inclusive by centering it around the birth of our nation, gives it a greater trajectory and scope to include other aspects. This will not belittle the contribution of Christianity, which was primarily influential in bringing together the scattered tribes and islands of the archipelago by the unifying power of the Holy Spirit in the good news of Jesus Christ. The inclusive theme will be an affirmation of the other influences that came before 1521, from the indigenous peoples, the first barangays, the coming of Islam and the other countries around us that have contributed to our languages, world view, culture in ways we have not appreciated enough in the past.

While the archipelago was already known in the region as a trading collection of tribes with each having its government and traditions, Magellan's coming opened the archipelago to the rest of the world. Thus, in the 2022 event we can be grateful to all the factors and influences, before and after 1521 that made us what we are. It will be an affirmation of the Filipino identity and talent to blend the different, precious and beautiful influences, a talent that has made us unique in the family of nations today, that we can blend in and adjust to any culture, and learn any language and speak it like a native of the place, as our millions of OFWs and expats give testimony to worldwide.

THE REVISED PROGRAMS FOR THE QUINCENTENNIAL 2022

To start off with the religious aspect of the quincentennial, the Archdiocese of Cebu, has revised its program of events until 2022, as well as the CBCP, for the national level both spelled out in *CBCP News*, September 24, 2020, and in *CBCP Releases New Schedule for Quincentennial Celebration* in SunStar, 27 September 2020, p.5.

We hope and pray that, as a grateful homage to the Creator for our country, and following the initiative of St. John Paul II, when he invited leaders of world religions to Assisi on October 27, 1986, to pray for peace, the closing of the quinqucentennial in 2022 could have a similar gathering of civic, political and religious leaders, who would present a unified program for the good of the country, that will join them in praying for deliverance from Covid-19, for national unity and peace. Would that not be a concrete expression of *Missio ad Gentes*, a message of dialogue, mutual acceptance and integration as one united Filipino family?

May the words of Pope Francis in the introduction to his new encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* challenge and inspire 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 travellers 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."²

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