The Gospel of Mercy for the Filipino Church

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Introduction

The celebration of the 500th anniversary of the first encounter between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the natives of the Philippines successfully proceeded in 2021, albeit with major modifications in plan and execution. Unfazed by major challenges, chief among them the worldwide coronavirus pandemic and its ensuing limitations, Church personnel creatively utilized both conventional and social media to allow people to witness, participate and celebrate the major opening events.

Taking great interest and closely following up on the activities from his office in Rome, Pope Francis lent valuable moral and spiritual support to mark the anniversary and bring it to the consciousness of the whole Church. It must be remembered that his 2015 pastoral visit to the country was prompted by a double purpose – to witness firsthand the sufferings of the Yolanda typhoon victims and to contribute to the enthusiasm of the preparatory phase of the quincentennial festivities.

However, a deeper consideration of the central message of Pope Francis' ministry - the message of God's mercy - can contribute to the deeper understanding of the great possibilities for evangelization that the anniversary commemoration holds. The themes of a church that is centrifugally moving, that accompanies people and that lives the spirit of poverty, close to the heart of Pope Francis and conspicuous in his

view of evangelization in *Evangelii Gaudium*, all stem from his reflections on mercy that is both God's most important attribute and the Church's most urgent task. This paper offers reflections on how to receive the message of mercy of Pope Francis and incorporate it in the enduring challenges the anniversary celebrations will leave behind.

Undaunted by initial setbacks, the Church in the Philippines successfully commenced the much-awaited celebration of the 500th anniversary of the first proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the natives of the islands. There were considerable hurdles to be confronted. First there was the insouciance of the national civil leadership towards the activities, fueled by the open antagonism of the country's president against the Catholic Church. Then came the coronavirus pandemic that caused the major standstill in all areas of life not only locally but globally.[1] The pandemic dislodged schedules, logistics, and human and material resources reserved for the commemorations. Thankfully, the resilience and creativity of Filipinos prevailed as various alternatives were considered and implemented allowing for even a low-key but consistently flowing program.

While dates were reset, participation reduced, or events spread in various locations, Filipino Catholics still enthusiastically followed the activities through the various social media that provided coverage. The Archdiocese of Manila launched its celebration and marked its establishment as the first diocese in the country, founded four hundred forty-two

1 Jonathan Daniels, "How to Mark the 500th Anniversary of Christianity's Arrival in the Philippines," *INQUIRER.net*, December 24, 2020, https://opinion.inquirer.net/136375/how-to-mark-the-500th-anniversary-of-christianitys-arrival-in-the-philippines (accessed on September 7, 2021).

years ago, with a simple Mass on February 6, 2021.[2] The Diocese of Legazpi even earlier kicked off their local celebration commemorating the missionary toil of the Spanish Franciscans in their area in 1578.[3] Key celebrations were then held in the Diocese of Maasin (recalling the first Mass) on March 31, 2021 and in the Archdiocese of Cebu (recalling the first baptism) on April 14, 2021. Other important events, like the mission congress, were further spread up until April 2022.[4]

Pope Francis' Special Message to Filipinos

Among the most enthusiastic and encouraging supporters of the celebration was none other than Pope Francis himself.[5] The Pope's primary aim in his 2015 visit to the country was to encounter the survivors of the 2013 super-typhoon Yolanda. Recorded as one of the strongest typhoons in history, Yolanda "killed more than 6,000 people and caused almost $3 billion in damage. In the storm's wake, 90 percent of the structures in

2 Jheng Prado, "Archdiocese of Manila Commence Year-long Celebration of 500 years of Christianity," *The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Manila*, February 7, 2021, https://rcam.org/archdiocese-of-manila-commence-year-long-celebration-of-500-years-of-christianity/ (accessed on September 7, 2021).

3 Mhar S. Arguelles, "Diocese of Legazpi Launches Celebration of 500 Years of Christianity," *INQUIRER.net*, November 29, 2020, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1366169/diocese-of-legazpi-launches-celebration-of-500-years-of-christianity (accessed on September 7, 2021).

4 Roy Lagarde, "Church Pushes Back 500 Years of Christianity Celebration due to Covid-19," *CBCP News*, September 24, 2020, https://cbcpnews.net/cbcpnews/church-pushes-back-500-years-of-christianity-celebration-due-to-covid19/ (accessed on September 7, 2021).

5 Zacarian Sarao, "Pope Francis 'took' Presiding of Mass to Celebrate 500 years of Christianity in PH," *INQUIRER.net*, August 25, 2021, https://globalnation.inquirer.net/198731/pope-francis-took-presiding-of-mass-to-celebrate-500-years-of-christianity-in-ph (accessed on September 7, 2021).

Tacloban were destroyed. Some 1.9 million people were left homeless and another 6 million displaced."[6]

Pope Francis wished to visit the country to express his unity with the suffering population. He was drawn to the plight of the typhoon victims whose rehabilitation was slow and incomplete years after. In general, the Pope was in a quest to touch base with the country's poor, not only in the Visayas, but also in the capital city of Manila. It was very clear that his desire was to spread the consoling message of God's tender closeness at the moment of adversity.

However, that visit had a secondary purpose. It was also the start of the preparatory phase of the quincentennial celebrations. Addressing then-President Benigno Aquino III, the Pope mentioned that his visit was a prelude to the celebration of "the fifth centenary of the first proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ on these shores."[7] He attached great importance to this anniversary and hoped it will highlight the Church's "continuing fruitfulness and its potential to inspire a society worthy of the goodness, dignity and aspirations of the Filipino people."[8]

Aside from the message of solidarity with the typhoon survivors, Pope Francis also brought to the Filipino Church his message of mercy. For the Pontiff, the first step to become a missionary church involved this simple reminder to reconsider God's mercy. He prompted the Church to stick to the

6 Joshua J. McElwee, "Francis Braves Tropical Storm to Offer Consolation to Typhoon Victims," *NCR Online*, January 16, 2015. https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/francis-braves-tropical-storm-offer-consolation-typhoon-victims (accessed on November 21, 2020).

7 Pope Francis, "Address before President Benigno Aquino III," *On a Mission of Mercy and Compassion: Homilies and Speeches of Pope Francis in His Pastoral Visit to the Philippines (Study Edition)*. (Makati: Word and Life Publications), 2015, 3.

8 Ibid., 4.

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basics of the faith, to the simple, rudimental message of Christ because "perhaps we have long since forgotten how to show and live the way of mercy."[9]

The practice of contemplating on mercy is crucial for any Christian community since "it is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends on it. Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to a hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness" (MV 2).

Far from being mere soft sentimentalism, the message of mercy was a decisive and emphatic call to action. Surely Pope Francis spoke of what it means "to 'cry; to be open to surprises; to love; to dream; to have no words to say; to be silent,"[10] but in the end, he also stressed that actions were important. CBCP President Archbishop Socrates Villegas thus called on the people to reflect on the papal visit's major themes to keep the memories of his visit alive for a long time. More importantly, he encouraged the faithful to act on the challenges the Pope expressed so that these can truly bring people the joy, hope, peace, and faith that comes from the Lord Jesus Christ.[11]

9 Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus (Bull of Indiction)* (Pasay City: Paulines, 2016), 10. Henceforth *MV*.

10 Socrates Villegas, "From Euphoria to Reality to Mission: Post Papal Visit Statement," January 22, 2015, *CBCP Online*, http://cbcponline.net/from-euphoria-to-reality-to-mission/ (accessed on November 7, 2020).

11 Ibid.

Towards Becoming a Merciful and Evangelizing Filipino Church

This double call to reflection and action becomes more significant in view of the potentials for evangelization that the quincentennial will bring. It will be highly beneficial to draw inspiration from Pope Francis' lessons on a merciful and evangelizing Church as Filipino Catholics give thanks for the half-millennium of blessings and as they prepare to confront the tasks of the demanding times ahead through a livelier sharing of the message of Jesus. The following are humble reflections on how to incorporate Pope Francis' models of a merciful and evangelizing Church in the consciousness of Church leaders and the faithful as they celebrate the quincentennial and, more importantly, as they strive to make its effects enduring and relevant for the future.

A Filipino Church that Goes Forth

The spread of the Christian faith in the Philippines succeeded due to the hard work of the protagonists – the missionary friars – many of whom were men of deep apostolic faith, holy life, and courageous zeal.[12] They were sincere visionaries bent on a singular purpose: to spread God's message of salvation to new lands in the Orient. Many of these missionaries had pioneering experiences in the Americas where they learned effective missionary methodology and strategies. Aware of the crusade of Fr. Bartolome de las Casas in the New World, these early missionaries served as a buffer against the Spanish colonizers' abuse of power

12 Crisostomo Yalung ed. *The Archdiocese of Manila: Pilgrimage in Time (1565-1999)*, vol. 1 (Manila: The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Manila, 2000), p 17.

https://publications.lst.edu/

and destructive force by protecting the natives and working for the salvation of their souls and their bodies. De las Casas wrote to the king in defense of the natives: "For what is necessary is not conquest by arms, but persuasion with sweet and divine words, and the example and works of a holy life…"[13] Thanks to these pioneering missionaries who learned this lesson, the bloodshed, and cruelty suffered by the tribes of the Americas were not replicated in the process of colonization of the Philippines.

Though they were few at first, these missionaries accepted the hardships and dangers of unfamiliar terrain, a strange culture, and a foreign way of life. Undaunted by the challenges they faced, these men steadily ventured into different places to meet the natives and proclaim the Gospel. There is hardly any province in the Philippines today where the faith has not been introduced by the series of missionary expeditions from different religious orders which were assigned to the country.

These early missionaries exemplified the Church that goes forth. They hiked mountains, traversed plains, and sailed perilous seas to evangelize, baptize, and to plant the Church. Redemptorist priest Picardal argues that though unfortunately identified with the caricature of a despotic friar in the popular imagination, the early missionaries were in fact, good priests, teachers, builders, leaders, and defenders of the people.[14] It is

13 John Schumacher, *Readings in Philippine Church History* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University) 1979, 6.

14 Amado Picardal, "Celebrating 500 Years of Christianity in the Philippines," *Rappler*, October 20, 2019, https://www.rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/celebrating-500-years-christianity-philippines (accessed on November 7, 2020).

a tribute to their lifelong sacrifices that the entire country is still predominantly Catholic after 500 years.

From the start of his pontificate, Pope Francis has always envisioned a Church always on the move. He has spoken vehemently against a self-referential Church, one that is complacent and satisfied, resting on its laurels and finding no reason to leave its comfortable and familiar premises. He adheres to the Vatican II image of the Church as a people on pilgrimage. He calls every Christian not only to be disciples, faithful to Christ, and loyal to the Church, but to be missionary disciples who personally embrace the call to take every opportunity, however simple, to spread the Word of Christ and to be willing to go to roads less traveled.

Pope Francis situates mercy at the center of this actively moving Church, which he also calls a "community of missionary disciples."[15] Such a community, he says, moves forward in search of people, impelled by mercy itself, since it had the first experience of God's infinite goodness and therefore "has an endless desire to show mercy" to others.[16]

To elucidate the merciful stance of being at the service of people in the peripheries, in their needs and sufferings, it is helpful to turn to another imagery popularized by Pope Francis, though one that was not from his original thoughts. In a famous interview shortly after his election, he "foreshadowed his program for the Catholic Church as a 'field hospital' for the wounded, a profound, indeed stunning image."[17]

15 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium (*Pasay City: Paulines, 2013), 24. Henceforth this will be cited as *EG.*

16 Ibid.

17 Blasé Cupich, "Field Hospital," in *A Pope Francis Lexicon*, edited by Joshua McElwee and Cindy Wooden (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press), 2018, 72.

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The Pope's own words were, in fact, most powerful and emotive in describing this vision. He told Fr. Spadaro: "I see clearly that the thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after battle… Heal the wounds, heal the wounds… And you have to start from the ground up."[18] The Pope is challenging the Church to prioritize the wounded persons around her.

It will be good to emphasize the sacrifices of the early missionaries to the Philippines in the celebrations of 2021-2022. Their mission set in motion the spread of the Christian faith in every part of this country. They were true harbingers of a missionary spirit and reliable instruments of the Church that goes where the need is great. In many ways, these missionaries were the first to bravely penetrate the geographical peripheries for the sake of bringing to people the Good News.

In these peripheries, the missionaries found the simple folks to whom they brought some knowledge of advanced methods of agriculture and fishing. They encountered the ignorant whom they taught to read and write. They met the sick for whom they became healers and consolers. Some of the missionaries even acted as military commanders defending the peaceful natives from the attacks of the marauding pirates from Mindanao.

Looking back at their achievements today can inspire the Church to set out and to continue discovering the modern peripheries that exist in our midst. There are still geographical peripheries waiting for the visit of Christians to teach, guide,

18 Pope Francis (with Antonio Spadaro), "A Big Heart Open to God: An interview with Pope Francis." *America* vol. 209 no. 8 (September 30, 2013), 24.

and help the people there. An example may be the indigenous communities that are unprotected and exploited. People who assist them, including priests and lay leaders, are targeted and branded as rebels or communist agents.

There are also new peripheries in the center of bustling cities or urban areas. These are existential peripheries where missionary disciples can make headway through their initiatives and creativity. Call center workers, slum dwellers, and the poor who are easy targets of extra-judicial killings belong to these new peripheries. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Pope contemplates the phenomenon of modern cities where new problems and concerns arise and where the Church's merciful and healing presence is needed (EG 74).

A Filipino Church that is Poor and for the Poor

Pope Francis' clarion call for intense involvement in the plight of the poor did not come as a big surprise to Catholics in this country as it did in the opulent nations of the West. Nor did his ringing campaign for a Church for the Poor come as a total novelty. Since 1991's Second Plenary Council of the Philippines,[19] the slogan "Church of the Poor" has been popular in talks, symposia, conferences, and meetings. PCP II recognized the "option for the poor" as the Philippine Church's way of promoting the dignity of the poor and of helping lift them up from situations of oppression and exploitation. The plenary council called on Catholics to review their relationship with the vast number of poor Filipinos and to give them priority in the space of the Church.

In glowing terms, PCP II described how the Philippine Church could become a champion of those who are

19 Henceforth PCP II.

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economically stranded and socially marginalized. Everything must begin with a desire to embrace the evangelical spirit of poverty, detached from material resources and having profound confidence in the Lord alone.[20] Members and leaders were encouraged to have a special love, a love of preference, for the poor.[21] This means giving both attention and time to the poor and being willing to use the Church' resources for their welfare.[22] Inspired by the words of Pope John Paul II, the Church must express its solidarity with the situation of the poor and collaborate with them in efforts that address the root of their problems. The Church of the poor sees Christ in the guise of those who are most neglected in society.[23]

Given the above description of one of PCP II's noble resolutions, it would seem that Filipinos do not need the reminder and motivation of Pope Francis. However, ten years after the assembly of PCP II, an evaluation of its implementation was conducted. In a private conversation with this researcher then, a Mindanao archbishop who was asked to speak on the theme "Church of the Poor" said in jest that he was tempted to say to the participants to just stop talking about the option for the poor because, in reality, it did not exist! Brandishing a slogan was not equivalent to truly having active, lasting programs designed to make the poor a central focus of the lives of dioceses and parishes. Without denying the positive impact of the concept in the consciousness of Catholics, the archbishop bravely admitted that its practical implementation remained one of the most difficult to achieve. In recent years,

20 Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House), 1992, 48.
21 Ibid 49.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid 50.

oblivious of PCP II, not much has been discussed about the Church in the Philippines becoming a Church of the Poor.

Pope Francis has placed the poor at the center of the Church's attention and action through his words and also through his inspiring way of life. He goes beyond the concept "option for the poor" by inviting the Church to first become to be a "poor Church." This calls for a real conversion, a radical change of attitudes, of the people in the Church. How insidiously has the type of worldliness that hides behind the veneer of religion, or piety, and even of poverty permeated the life of the Church.

Following the thoughts of Pope Francis, it is clear that "mercy is the ultimate foundation of the preferential option for the poor."[24] Divine preference has decreed that God show the poor "his first mercy," and so the Church must follow this noble example (EG 198). What is the special reason for the poor to be so chosen to merit this special benevolence? They are certainly not better human beings than the wealthy. Nor are they more virtuous than people in other sectors of society. Receiving God's mercy is pure grace from the generous heart of God. "Their empty hands and empty stomachs make them open for his love, and God gives the poor and the excluded his merciful love, thus making them first in receiving the kingdom of heaven. Human beings who follow God in his mercy and ally themselves with the poor will be their co-heir."[25]

Looking back at the history of the Church as an institution in the Philippines, it is undeniable that it had the advantage

24 Erik Borgman, "A Field Hospital after Battle: Mercy as a Fundamental Characteristic of God's Presence," in *Mercy* edited by Lisa Cahill, Diego Irarrazaval and João Vila-Chã, *Concilium*, 2017/4, 65-75 (London: SCM Press), 2017, 71.

25 Borgman, "A Field Hospital after Battle: Mercy as a Fundamental Characteristic of God's Presence," 73.

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of influence, property, and education. While the majority of Catholics are poor, the existence of the Church has been stable and enduring. Far from having been a persecuted church, in many ways, it has been a privileged one. The scandal of massive poverty in Asia's most Christian country raises many questions and poses huge challenges for evangelization.

One of the preparatory themes for the quincentennial was dedicated to the poor. Pope Francis mentioned this in his opening statement during his 2015 visit. He was aware that the Church is at the forefront of relief operations in times of calamities. He knew that the Church continues to be the biggest benefactor and advocate of poor people outside of the government, given the limitations of resources and personnel.

The coming celebrations of the fifth centenary of the first proclamation of the Gospel will be enriched with lessons from Pope Francis' ideas of a truly poor church, in view of the future, of life beyond the first five hundred years. Can the future Filipino Church be vulnerable in the presence of the poor, not talking over their heads but silently standing in reverence and solidarity before their situation of misery and pain like Pope Francis did in Tacloban? Can the future Filipino Church learn how to weep like Jesus for Lazarus, Jairus' daughter and the son of the widow of Naim because it has become truly merciful and thus can internalize the suffering of others? Can the future Filipino Church have the courage to beg from the poor, asking them to evangelize it with their poverty, humility, trust, and joy in the Lord?[26]

26 Pope Francis, "Impromptu Speech at the University of Santo Tomas," in *On a Mission of Mercy and Compassion: Homilies and Speeches of Pope Francis in His Pastoral Visit to the Philippines (Study Edition).* (Makati: Word and Life Publications), 2015, 44-45.