Landas 37:1 (2025) 137–142

HOMILY: THE FEAST OF ST. MATTHEW AND CBAP'S 25TH ANNIVERSARY

EPH 4:1–7.11–13; MT 9:9–13

21 SEPTEMBER 2024

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How time flies! The Catholic Biblical Association of the Philippines (CBAP) is already 25 years old! Happy Anniversary to all of us! It feels like just yesterday when a small group of biblical scholars and teachers came together to establish CBAP in 1999. I well remember that year when Fr. James Swetnam, God rest his soul, came over to the country to help us start CBAP. That year was also meaningful for me, for it was the year that I left formal teaching in the academe and started my life as a parish priest in laid-back St. Ezekiel Moreno Parish in Macarascas, Palawan. Since that year, I left formation work in the seminary. I was able to teach some courses in the Bible time and again after that year, but no longer as a full-time teacher. I was able to give some courses in San Jose Seminary in Puerto Princesa, in San Carlos Seminary, and in Don Bosco School of Theology before I came as bishop in Taytay, Palawan, in the year 2021.

A lot has changed in 25 years. Now the membership of the CBAP has grown. Some of the old guards have gone to the Father of us All, and many young people, most of whom I no longer personally know, have enlivened the group. CBAP has indeed changed and grown these 25 years!

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Thank you for inviting me to be part of this silver anniversary, especially for asking me to preside at this mass. It is providential that today is the feast of St. Matthew, an apostle and an evangelist. As an apostle, he reminds us of our call to follow the Lord. The succinct call of Jesus to Matthew, "Follow me!" is addressed to all of us. Our various engagements in the service of the Word of God—as professors, as writers, as scholars and researchers, as Bible animators, as translators, and what not—these are all different expressions of our effort to live in a manner worthy of the call we have each received to follow the Lord Jesus. I believe that I will not be far from the truth in affirming that each of us tries to be faithful to the Word of God and to spread the Word in various ways, through our teaching, through print media, through electronic media, and our preaching. These are the engagements of an apostle and an evangelist: to be faithful to the Word and to spread the Good News. Because of this fidelity and this going out to preach, the message goes out through all the earth. We continue the mission to let the message of the good news reach all the earth.

"Reach all the earth"—this is a tall order. In the year 2033, nine years from now, we will be celebrating the 2,000th anniversary of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus and the great missionary mandate of preaching to the ends of the earth. But after 2000 years, only around two billion of the eight billion inhabitants of the earth have accepted Christ, and that in various levels—some deeply, but many superficially. I wonder how many of the more than six billion non-Christians have at least heard of Jesus Christ, have heard the message that God loves them so much that he sent his only Son to die for them so that they may have the fullness of life.

Our theme for this anniversary celebration is: "'SPEAK, LORD!' (1 Sam 3:9): 25 Years of Listening and Responding to God's Word for a World in Crisis." We believe that God continues to speak to the world even in this world of crisis that we are in. He is not absent from our problems. He has something to say in our crisis. We are grateful to believe in this. At the same time, we feel the weight of the responsibility of listening and responding to His Word, and resounding it to our world. How to do this?

When I started my ministry outside of the seminary and academic setting 25 years ago, I was so eager to spread the knowledge of the Bible, and I still am. But back then, I tried to do the ministry as I had known it then. I organized Bible studies among the fisherfolk and the farmers in Macarascas in Palawan. They did not have any Bible. I got them Bibles. I asked them to read—they could hardly read; the prints in our standard Bibles are too small for them. More than the prints, they could hardly read, literally. Probably none of them had read a book in their life, not even a comic book. There is none in our area. They could not read, so I talked and conversed with them. I found that they do not have any sense of history or geography. There is no significance for them of what 2000 years or 300 years ago means. They do not know where Canaan is, much less Babylon or Assyria. They are blank about salvation history. Their concerns and knowledge are only in the here and now. So they cannot connect with the literary-historical criticism, the matter that we mostly teach in the seminary. Hence, a new approach has to be done to present the Bible and its truths to them.

Trying, observing, and getting feedback from them, I realize the value of the sayings and parables of Jesus. They can easily relate that healthy people do not need a doctor, while sick people do. They can relate to the story of Jesus about the call of Matthew. They can relate that, being a tax collector, Matthew can be taken as a corrupt person and even a traitor because he was working for a foreign power. They know what corruption is. They experience this even among their barangay officials. They understand what a *makapili* is. I am sorry that I have realized these things only after my stint of teaching in the seminary. I wonder if my students also realized this now that they are engaged in the preaching of the Word in their ministries. I hope they do not preach what I had taught them in class about exegesis. Yes, we still need to do exegesis; this is an exercise that we do to know the text and its meaning well, but we do not do exegesis for the people. Only a few are capable of doing this. However, we impart to them the result of our exegesis. We who have the facility; we masticate the Word and then give the people spiritual food that they can digest and apply in their lives. I do not know if my experience over these 25 years is in line with your own experiences in making the Word of God alive among

our ordinary Catholics. Let us be forewarned. I have heard it said that exegetes are boring preachers if we preach as we teach exegesis. The challenge is how to preach the freshness of the Word in a way that people can understand and live.

Do we need to change gear? While we have to make the effort to make the Bible relevant to the two billion Christians—and this in itself is already a tall order knowing how ignorant our people are about the faith and the Bible, should we not set our eyes and our efforts to reach out to the other six billion non-Christians out there, if we have to preach the Good News to all peoples? We can hope to have greater and faster reach if we seriously engage in digital evangelization. There is a vast digital continent out there that we need to reach.

Allow me to share with you some of my small experiences. Although situated in far-away Taytay, I can reach thousands through the daily episodes of FIRST THINGS FIRST that are put on social media. It is a short explanation of the first readings of the daily liturgy in Tagalog. I am honestly surprised that Filipinos access it even in Dubai, Australia, and other parts of the world. I hope I can reach some soul out there looking for some good news to hang on to.

Another experience: Because of the geographical situation of our apostolic vicariate, our priests can reach only a small portion of their flock on Sundays. There are very limited means of transportation in our parishes for people to come to church, and the chapels are far from each other or are even situated in other islands. The priests can reach only three or four chapels each Sunday. We have more than 500 chapels and they are served by only 42 priests. So, most of our faithful are served by our lay ministers in their respective chapels. These lay ministers lead in the liturgy of the Word with Holy Communion. But how can we expect them to share the Word of God every Sunday in a meaningful and correct way? Many of them have barely finished high school! To remedy the situation a bit, I write the homilies that they can read every Sunday. I post these on my Facebook page and the Facebook page of the vicariate, and they share them in their chat groups. I simply ask them to read these homilies well and meaningfully.

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I make it a point that these reflections are simple and relevant. I hope that in this way the people in our far-flung areas can be fed with God's Word regularly and they can profit from it.

So far, these are some of my efforts to reach many more people than I can physically minister to. I am sure you also have your own experiences in responding to the mandate to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the Body of Christ. I am interested to know them and be inspired by them. We continue the work of St. Matthew, an apostle and an evangelist, to make Jesus known and loved.

St. Matthew, inspire us, guide us, and pray for us. Amen.

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Broderick Soncuaco Pabillo, D.D. was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Manila by Pope Benedict XVI in 2006 and became Vicar Apostolic of Taytay, Palawan, in 2021 under Pope Francis. He earned his licentiate in Sacred Scriptures from the Pontifical Gregorian University in 1986. Pabillo previously worked at the Don Bosco Center of Studies and served as rector of Don Bosco Seminary. He also taught in various seminaries across the Philippines. A respected biblical scholar, his book, *The Bible: 100% Divine, 100% Human*, is a popular introduction to the Scriptures. Before becoming a bishop, he was the parish priest of St. Ezekiel Moreno Parish in Puerto Princesa. Over the years, Pabillo has held several leadership roles within the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP). He also served as Chair of the Office of Evangelization of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences from 2017 to 2019 and was elected President of the Philippine Bible Society for two terms, from 2012 to 2014 and again from 2020 to 2021.