500 Years of Catholic Faith in the Philippines:

Today and Onward

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No matter how the pandemic interrupted our daily lives and activities, it does not stop the Philippine Church from celebrating five hundred years since our first encounter with the Christian faith. Surrounding circumstances and motivations for the introduction of the faith may not be as genuine as expected, nonetheless Catholicism greatly affected our history. The fact that the country remains predominantly Catholic attests to this. The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP-II) best describes the effect of Catholicism in the country:

> Stormy seas and straits divided one island from another. Different cultures and dialects divided the early Filipinos… It was then the vital task of the First Evangelization to give our people unity… accomplished through one Faith… through one Body.[1]

Current circumstances may have dulled the celebratory mood, but these fortuitous circumstances provide an opportunity to reflect on how we, as a local Church, have lived out the gift of Catholic faith. As early as PCP-II, the Philippine Church had to answer: "Has that faith, does that

1 PCP II, "Message of the Council," *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*.

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faith, make any difference in our life, in our nation? (PCP-II, 2)" After three decades, we ask: how has our faith as Catholics been? A broad question maybe, but it begs to be answered.

Yes, we are undoubtedly a religious people,[2] but what is our basis that we are also a people of faith? I came up with these three criteria based on theological learnings: Familiarity with God, perception toward the Church and the Sacraments, and Christian witnessing. The first, better expressed in Filipino as *pagkakilala sa Diyos,* gauges not only knowledge of God but also our personal relationship with Him. This personal relationship with the Trinitarian God enables us to become our full selves (CFC 63) and understand better the central mystery of the Church, the Trinity (CCC 234). The second, *pakikibahagi sa Simbahan*, examines how we perceive our Catholic identity and mission. The last of the three, *pakikitungo sa kapwa*, gauges how we lived our lives in the service of our neighbor (LG 40), and to our common home. After these, I would address the question that naturally follows: *Quo vadis*? Since our faith as Filipino Catholics is not just a decision but a life commitment, our faith must grow[3] and bear fruit in our lives.

Pagkakilala sa Diyos

It is no secret that Philippine Catholicism is deeply focused on the life and person of Jesus Christ. The two largest devotions in the country honor the Child Jesus (*Santo Niño de Cebu, Manila*), and the suffering Christ (Quiapo's *Itim na Nazareno*). *Catechism for Filipino Catholics* ascribes our fondness for the *Santo Niño* to our fondness for children (CFC 35). A scholar posits that the devotion to the Child

2 Teodoro Bacani, Jr. *Faith and New Evangelization*, (Manila: Gift of God Publications, 2013).

3 Ibid.

Jesus merged pre-Christian and Christian beliefs, as evident during the Sinulog.[4] The wide acceptance of the child Jesus is undeniable; He's in houses, restaurants, and even jeepneys, even donning various uniforms.[5] The devotion to the Child Jesus is a tacit assent that "Jesus has united Himself with every man (GS 22)" "… that he, made man, might make men gods (CCC 460)". This belief is founded on the mystery of Incarnation, the Word of God becoming flesh (Jn 1:14) to be in solidarity with us. Jesus embodies God's gratuitous desire to reveal Himself and to save humanity (DV 2). The incarnate Jesus makes real God's desire to be God-with-us (Mt 1:23), and elevate us to partake in the Divine nature (2 Pt 1:4).

Devotion to the Black Nazarene is equally fervent that even COVID 19 could not deter hundreds of thousands of devotees from attending.[6] Nonbelievers would easily condemn such actions as reckless or even uncritical devotion.[7] However, the devotees' raw faith highlights their familiarity with God, confident that Jesus hears their pleas for deliverance and relief. In His public ministry, Jesus' words and deeds revealed that the Kingdom of God is in our midst to free us from earthly evils (CCC 548). He expelled demons (Mk 9:14-29), cured the sick (Mk 2:1-12), forgave sinners, (Jn 8:1-11), and even called some to be his disciples (Mt 9:9-13). Jesus became their hope and becomes our hope as well. The dark-skinned

4 Michael Chua, "Why Filipinos Love the Santo Nino," *National Quincentennial Committee of the Philippines,* https://nqc.gov.ph/en/resources/why-filipinos-love-the-santo-nino (accessed on 14 January 2021).

5 Ibid.

6 Lois Calderon, Tristan Nodalo and Greg Cahiles, "Hundreds of thousands of Black Nazarene devotees flock to Quiapo Church," CNN Philippines, https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/1/9/Black-Nazarene-feast-2021.html (accessed on 14 January 2021).

7 Daniel Pilario, "Praying Bodies, Dying Bodies: Reflection on the Nazareno and Santo Niño," *Philippine Sociological Review* (2017) Vol. 65.

Christ burdened with the cross strikes a chord in our hearts because we see God experiencing our poverty and suffering (CFC 553), assuring us that God understands our weaknesses and fears (CFC 40). Furthermore, the image of the Nazareno is a reminder that by Jesus' wounds, we are healed (Is 53:4-5). His suffering and death alone did not save us, but it was His perfect, self-giving love (CFC 558) granting us redemption and forgiveness.

However, the image of the *Nazareno* may transmit the message of docility in the face of injustice and oppression or even glorify suffering. God wants us to be free from these! Good Friday, not the whole Paschal Mystery. Through His redeeming sacrifice, Jesus inspires and shows us that we can overcome our tendencies to be self-centered and sinful. Jesus loved us even until His death on the cross, so through His obedience, we may be made righteous (Rom 5:19). The story ends not with the suffering *Nazareno* but with the risen Christ. This is our hope too. Because Christ became one like us, we too shall experience resurrection and vindication (Rom 6:5), not as slaves but as fellow heirs (Gal 4:6), sons and daughters of the Father.

Unfortunately, in contrast to our extensive familiarity and faith in Jesus, there is a gaping lack of intimacy with the Father and the Holy Spirit, or even an understanding of the Trinity for that matter. Aren't we Catholics baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (CCC 233)? Don't we invoke the Trinity in the Sign of the Cross, the Creed, and other prayers? Our Catholic faith is based on and marked by the Trinity (CFC 268)! But alas, most Filipinos are not that familiar with the Trinity, only acquainted and brought up only in scholarly discussion.

Most Filipino fathers are silent providers, conditioned to be inexpressive and 'masculine'. Worse, some are abusive or even absent fathers. These untoward experiences cause resistance in using "Abba, Father! (Gal 4:6)" But as early as the Old Testament, God revealed Himself as a Father, "the first origin of everything and transcendent authority (CCC 239)", a gracious and merciful [רַחוּם] God abounding in love and fidelity [חֶסֶד] (Ex 34:6). However, God transcends categories of male or female (CCC 239); *hesed* [חֶסֶד], loving kindness is often ascribed as a male trait, while *rahamim* [רַחֲמִים], mercy, compassion is ascribed as a female trait. The Father is neither man nor woman; God is God, the origin and standard (CCC 239).

Even the Holy Spirit is not given much attention, despite the charismatic movement gaining traction and Filipino culture being rife with spirits, *engkantos*, faith healers (CFC 1269-70). It doesn't help that the Spirit has no form, symbolized by fire (Ac 2:3) or light (CCC 696-97), and that the Spirit is not something objective but manifests in our subjective experience (CFC 1276-77). We should recall that the Spirit has been around since Creation (Gn 1:1-2) as well through the prophets. More explicitly, Christ promised us the Paraclete that will dwell in and with us forever (Jn 14:16-17). The Spirit is now present in the Church: manifesting the risen Christ through the Word, making present the Lord especially through the Eucharist, calling and gathering together the people of God as His Body, the Church (CCC 737).

Pakikibahagi sa Simbahan

Our perception of the Church and the Sacraments has been deeply influenced by our culture, for better or worse. Filipinos are meal-oriented, hospitable people (CFC 37),

celebrating life events or achievements with fiestas where most people can partake of. This is reflected in the grand patronal fiestas, especially in Visayas and Mindanao, where every household prepares meals for everyone. Our fiestas bear similarities with the Eucharist, the memorial of the Last Supper (1 Cor 11:23-25) based on the Passover Meal (Ex 12). Through the Eucharist, we share in the same meal: Christ Himself whose Real Presence manifests through the bread and wine (ND 1519). The gracious host that He is, Christ invites and gathers us as a community not only for spiritual nourishment but also for communal celebration (CFC 1680) of Christ's self-giving. It is Christ who leads us to worship the Father (Jn 4:23). No wonder the Eucharist syncs well with our meal-oriented culture, as most Filipino Catholics make it a point to attend Mass as a family.

Our Filipino culture also places a premium on belongingness (CFC 1353) and social relations based on family (PCP-II 19). This disposition is evident in the way we uphold familial loyalty, *utang na loob*, and "*Pinoy* pride." Hence, Filipino families have their children baptized as Catholics because it has been the tradition (*nakagisnan)* to ensure that they grow in the same faith. This is favorable for transmitting God's Revelation and the Christian way of life [Tradition] to the succeeding generations [tradition]. Children are taught prayers like the *Pasion*, rituals like the *padasal*, gestures that venerate the saints, morals, and teachings [traditions] which articulate the Christian way of life (Congar). This also exemplifies the Church as a community of disciples united by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (LG 4). In communion with each other in faith, hope, and love, we should build up and look after one another (1Thes 5:11).

However, family preferences and affiliation can also be unfavorable. The family can hand over traditions without proper explanation, at times even passing traditions laced with superstition. I recall pilgrims in Quiapo asking to be sprinkled with more Holy Water to receive added blessings. Moreover, a strong sense of affiliation may foster herd mentality and a harmful us-versus-them mentality (FT 152). In other words, too much emphasis might be placed solely in favoring fellow Christians (*ad intra*) and less on evangelization, ecumenism, and interreligious dialogue (*ad gentes*). This is understandable given the lack of clergy [1 priest for every 13000 Catholics] and lay formation, as well as focusing on converting people to the Christian faith through debates.

In addition, many Filipino Catholics see the Church as solely sacramental and liturgical. Many equate Church with fulfilling the Sunday Mass obligation without a proper understanding of the Eucharist, ending up as mere spectators/ passive receivers of the Body of Christ (CFC 1671). It also doesn't help that the term "separation of Church and State" is understood as the Church's non-interference in state/ worldly matters, "rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's (Mk 12:17) ." These misconceptions obstruct the Church's mission "to announce good tidings of salvation… that all men may know…Jesus Christ" (SC 9), especially to the poor and marginalized (Lk 4:18-20)! This mission is imprinted into our identity through Baptism: to bear witness to Christ (LG 10) and live a Christian life in society (LG 40).

This sense of mission should be rekindled, especially among the laity. Mission is not for the priests and religious alone, since genuine social transformation is only possible when the people actively participate in a "people power movement" that affirms our gifts of freedom and responsibility

(PCP-II 325-27). The mystery of the Church is not just to bring God closer to humanity through the Sacraments, but also ultimately bring all people together (Jn 17:21) towards our heavenly home with God and the saints (LG 48). In short, being Church involves sharing God's light through our Christian lives that others may see …and give glory to the Father (Mt 5:16).

Pakikitungo sa Kapwa

"How can we be silent about the God who loves us, the Son who lays down His life for us, and the Spirit who dwells in us?" (PCP-II 78) How do we bear witness to our faith? Worship is integral but "the Lord requires us to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God" (Mic 6:8). Our faith is shown in how we treat and serve others, as well as in our care for our common home. I have seen the Filipino Catholics' faith realized through humanitarianism and *bayanihan* spirit: the outpouring donations of food those debilitated by the ECQ, the collaboration, and planning in helping Yolanda victims recover and build up resilience for lasting recovery,[8] and even the founding of the Kalinga Center, "a venue to empower the homeless to turn their lives around.[9]"

Filipinos are undoubtedly gracious and hospitable but the roots of social sin has affected our sense of right and wrong. This split between faith and action (CFC 680) occurs when our daily lives do not reflect our faith (GS 43). At the root of this are inconsistencies in conscience formation as well as "religious ignorance and secularistic attitudes and values"

8 Ronald Reyes, "Philippines: Catholic Church shares post-Yolanda' recovery gains," 24 November 2018, *Prevention Web,* https://www.preventionweb.net/news/view/62186 (accessed on 15 January 2021).

9 AJ Kalinga Foundation Inc., "Vision and Mission," *Kalinga Foundation,* https://ajkalingafoundation.org/ (accessed on 15 January 2021).

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(CFC 765). We see this in many occasions, like devout mass goers gossiping and slandering immediately after the Mass or those who promote animal rights but do not care a bit about human rights.

A more detailed, Catholic example focuses on the treatment of human life. Many vocal Catholics opposed the passing of the Reproductive Health (RH) Law for encouraging artificial birth control methods. This is tantamount to a violation against natural law and respect for human life. But these same Catholics name-call, use the pulpit to speak harshly against the law's proponents, and even endorse political candidates against the RH law. [10] While the clergy are allowed to participate in public discourse, they did not consider the proponents as well as the non-Catholics (PCP- II, 358). In their fight to uphold the importance of human life, they became uncharitable, even Pharisaic.

More recently, the extrajudicial killings at the wake of Rodrigo Duterte's War on Drugs caused controversy and even divide among Filipino Catholics. The fifth commandment explicitly forbids killing. Jesus Himself sought out sinners to eat with them and save them (Lk 15:1-3), earning the Pharisees' ire. Yet how come many Filipinos believe that these killings are necessary and even justifiable? Is it because the Bible tells us to be subordinate to earthly authorities because they have been established by God (Rom 13:1-3)? Have they not heard in the Bible about the many erring and even oppressive earthly rulers? Or is it because they consider drug addicts less than human? But are we not all affected by "sinful structures of injustice, oppression, and exploitation? (PCP-II 261-71) Or is it because we view them as irredeemable, and not our

10 Eric Marcelo Genilo, SJ., "The Church of PCP II after the RH Bill Debate," in *The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*: Quo Vadis? (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2015), 177.

concern? [11] Pope Francis reminds us that "we are either all saved or no one is saved," because the poverty and suffering in one part affect the whole nation (FT 152).

If sin has crept into society and affected our hearts with violence and apathy, this same violence manifests in the lack of care in our land, air, and waters (LS 2). Each year, our country is ravaged by huge floods and mountain landslides caused by deforestation from illegal logging, not to mention the infamous 'Dolomite beach' that was illegally mined in a Cebu town.[12] All of these wasteful abuses to our earth are because of "shortsighted approaches to the economy, commerce, and production (LS 32) ." We misunderstood our God-given responsibility of filling the earth and having dominion over it (Gn 1:28). We did not treat our motherland with care and respect as a gift from our Father (CFC 348).

Quo Vadis, Philippine Church?

Aware of the lights and shadows of the Filipino faith, what should we do in response? "Move forward we must (PCP-II 34)"— in intimately knowing the Father and the Spirit, in being faithful members of the Church, and in becoming a Church of Community and Solidarity (PCP-II 32). For us to move forward, we have to go deeper in faith. Just a seed has to grow roots, our faith must be deepened lest it withers or gets uprooted easily. If we want our faith to endure difficulties and uncertainties and respond to the signs of the times, our faith must go back to the source and be rooted in the person

11 Jayeel Cornelio and Erron Medina, "Christianity and Duterte's War on Drugs in the Philippines" in *Politics, Religion, and Ideology* 20/2 (22 May 2019), https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21567689.2019.1617135 (accessed on 16 January 2021).

12 ABS-CBN News, "Preventing another tragedy: Why Cebu Province Banned Dolomite Mining," 9 September, 2020, https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/09/09/20/preventing-another-tragedy-why-cebu-province-banned-dolomite-mining (accessed on 14 January 2021).

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of Jesus Christ (PCP-II 35) and to the source of our identity as Catholics: the Trinity. As we grow in familiarity with God through prayer, we will come to know that "no one lives and dies for oneself" (Rom 14:7) Like roots, our Catholic faith should not narrow our minds and hearts but open us instead to greater sensitivity and understanding towards the people and the world around us (FT 174). A deep, mature faith entails confronting the questions of our time and responding to the issues we face because "Action on behalf of justice … is a constitutive dimension of …the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation." (JW 6)

As we deepen our faith, we are also called to cultivate a culture of genuine encounter (FT 30). Filipinos are naturally inclined to socialize, but we also have that universal bias for the same affiliation. Genuine encounter does not alter or sanitize reality to favor our preference. We cannot shoehorn the faith into our lives and into others if we cannot truly encounter the situation of our land. Rather than debating on who is right, Pope Francis recommends dialogue (FT 47, 50). It may not be the easy and quick answer we expect from the messiahs we put up in our pedestals, but if we want our faith to last and have a lasting effect, it must grow slowly and take root. Thus, the way to a lasting faith is the way of genuine and lasting encounters.

To conclude, our Catholic faith the past 500 years is a gift worthy of celebration. There are many things to be grateful for. God's grace helped us grow in our familiarity with God, our identity as a Church, and in our Christian witnessing, but we must also respond accordingly. The gift of faith is both a personal and communal responsibility, after all. There remain many opportunities for maturity in our faith and

further growth, but we can only do so much. We are not the master builder, only the workers. As we move onward to the future of the Philippine Church, my hope is that we continue to ask for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest[13] as we do our best in deepening and sharing the gift of faith. We ask for the Spirit's guidance, as our Bishops prayed 30 years ago:

> Accompanied by the Spirit of truth, [may we] purify our popular devotions and rituals from some of the superstitions that still contaminate them. [May] the Spirit of Wisdom, help our BECs progress from external rituals to internalized values. [And may] the Spirit of fortitude, bring us out of our selfish isolation and gives us the courage to be involved in those tasks which lead to the transformation of our society. (PCP-II, Introductory Document)

13 Cardinal Dearden, "Prophets of a Future not Our Own," *USCCB*, https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/prophets-of-a-future-not-our-own (accessed on 15 January 2021).

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