

Monitor

PROTAGONIST OF TRUTH, PROMOTER OF PEACE

Church's social action arm seeks mining moratorium

By ROY LAGARDE

THE Catholic Church's social action and advocacy arm has called for a pause on all mining activities in the country after recent flooding ravaged communities in Mindanao.

Caritas Philippines said a moratorium on mining is a "critical step" to prevent future tragedies and address "systematic issues that exacerbate disasters."

"The recent devastation in Mindanao is not a natural disaster alone. It's a man-made tragedy fuelled by greed and irresponsible practices, said its vice president, Bishop Gerardo Alminaza.

"Weak governance, political dynasties, and rampant mining have created a ticking time bomb, and it just exploded," he said.

Saying that the nation "cannot continue plundering our resources," Alminaza stressed that "we need sustainable practices that respect the

environment and prioritize the well-being of future generations."

The national Caritas has mobilized its emergency operational center (EOC) and deployed relief assistance to affected dioceses.

Over 1.38 million people in Mindanao were affected by massive flooding, according to the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council.

However, Caritas Philippines executive secretary Fr. Antonio Labiao Jr stressed that while relief is crucial, "it's like bandaging a wound without addressing the infection."

"We need a systemic change, and that starts with stopping the bleeding—a nationwide moratorium on mining," Labiao said.

"Irresponsible mining practices have ravaged our environment. Deforestation, soil destabilization, and altered water flow—these are not just statistics, they're the very reasons our communities are drowning."

Mining / A7



Members of "Koalisyon Laban sa ChaCha" hold protest against Charter change at Plaza Roma in Manila's Intramuros Feb. 22, 2024. ROY LAGARDE

PASTORAL CONCERNS

B1

'We are ashes loved by God'

Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis during the Mass on Ash Wednesday, 14 February 2024, Basilica of Santa Sabina

PEOPLE, FACTS AND PLACES

A8

Pope Francis honors 'Our Lady of Antipolo' with 'golden rose'

Bishop David elected FABC vice president



Bishop Pablo Virgilio David of Kalookan, president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines. CBCP NEWS

THE head of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) has been elected the next vice president of the Federation of

David / A7

Bishops join protest against Charter change

SOME Catholic bishops accompanied protesters in Manila against the current attempts to tweak the Constitution.

Bishop Jose Colin Bagaforo of Caritas Philippines said they are not letting their guards down against what he called 'underground works' for Charter change through the supposed "people's initiative."

"We are still concerned because we are not sure of the strength of the underground works and they might give value to what is called 'fake' people's initiative," Bagaforo told reporters.

"So we need to be critical, we need

to stand up, and we need to raise the voice of the majority," he said.

Bagaforo was joined by Bishop Emeritus Deogracias Iniguez of Kalookan and former chairman of the CBCP's Episcopal Commission on Public Affairs.

Several priests and nuns were also seen at the rally held at Plaza Roma, right in front of the Palacio del Gobernador where the main office of the Commission on Elections is located.

The demonstration was organized by "Koalisyon Laban sa ChaCha", composed of various religious groups and civil society organizations.

Bagaforo, who is also the bishop of Kidapawan, called on the faithful not to allow lawmakers to revise the Constitution without proper consultation and full transparency.

"There are many doubts because there is no transparency. What are their true intentions?" the prelate added.

"We pray that our leaders will not be led into the temptation of changing the Constitution for power and riches but instead be steadfast in fulfilling their duties and responsibilities as servant-leaders of the people," he also said. (CBCP News)

'Holiness is greater than just fairness,' Nuncio tells canon lawyers



Papal nuncio Archbishop Charles Brown delivers his homily during Mass for the 30th Canon Law Society of the Philippines (CLSP) National Convention at the Dipolog Cathedral on Feb. 27, 2024. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

By CHRISMA MANGAOIL

Contributor

PAPAL nuncio Archbishop Charles Brown has reminded the county's canon lawyers of the deeper context of canon law, emphasizing

its connection to justice in the evangelical sense.

Speaking at Mass during the 30th Canon Law Society of the Philippines (CLSP) National Convention in Dipolog City on Feb. 27, he stressed the need for justice to

have a pastoral dimension alongside its usual association with justice.

"Holiness is greater than just fairness. There's a salvific function of canon law," Brown said in his homily at the Dipolog Cathedral.

"Relieving burdens and facilitating holiness, untying, unknotting of knots should be the aim of canon law," he said. "Penalties are designed to bring us back to Christ."

More than 100 participants joined this year's CLSP convention held on Feb. 26 to 28, with the theme, "The canonical aspects of the internal forum: Beyond the seal of confession to the realm of governance and spiritual direction."

At the opening Mass presided over by Bishop Severo Caermare of Dipolog on Feb. 26, he stressed the importance of mercy in the administration of justice.

Holiness / A7

Cebu archbishop seeks return of 'sacred' pulpit panels from National Museum



The National Museum of the Philippines on Feb. 13 receives 19th-century panels depicting the founder of the Augustinian Order from private collectors Edwin and Aileen Bautista. PHOTO FROM NMP FACEBOOK PAGE

THE Archdiocese of Cebu has claimed ownership of 19th-century pulpit panels removed from a church in Boljoon decades ago, now held by the National Museum of the Philippines (NMP).

Archbishop Jose Palma said the four panels were removed without the

church's permission and demanded for its 'immediate return' to the Archdiocesan Shrine of Patrocinio de Maria Santissima.

"The Archdiocese of Cebu hereby asserts its ownership of these panels and requests their immediate return

Cebu / A7



VISITA IGLESIA

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Pope Francis urges 'an immediate cease-fire in Gaza' that frees hostages, grants aid



Speaking in his Angelus address on March 3, 2024, about the Israel-Hamas war, Pope Francis made an emotional plea for negotiations to reach a deal that both frees the hostages immediately and grants civilians access to humanitarian aid. **VATICAN MEDIA**

By **COURTNEY MARES**
Catholic News Agency

VATICAN City—"Enough!" "Stop!" Pope Francis repeated from the window of the Vatican's Apostolic Palace on Sunday as he called for Israel and Palestine to reach an agreement for "an immediate cease-fire in Gaza."

Speaking in his Angelus address on March 3, the pope made an emotional plea for negotiations to reach a deal that both frees the hostages immediately and grants civilians access to humanitarian aid.

"I carry daily in my heart, with

sorrow, the suffering of the peoples in Palestine and Israel due to the ongoing hostilities," the pope said, reflecting on five months of war in Gaza.

"The thousands of dead, the wounded, the displaced, the immense destruction, causes pain, and this with tremendous consequences on the little ones and the defenseless who see their future compromised. I wonder: Do you really think you are going to build a better world this way? Do you really think you are going to achieve peace? Enough, please! Let us all say: Stop! Please stop!"

The pope made his appeal as negotiations are underway for a weeklong cease-fire between Israel and Hamas. President Joe Biden said last week that he believed that a cease-fire could go into effect as early as March 4.

The Associated Press reported that Israel has essentially agreed to a six-week cease-fire framework that would include Hamas releasing some of the most vulnerable of the roughly 130 hostages being held in Gaza, citing a senior U.S. official. A response from Hamas is expected as talks resume in Cairo on March 3.

Pope Francis said: "I encourage the continuation of negotiations for an immediate cease-fire in Gaza and throughout the region, so that hostages can be freed immediately and return to their anxiously

awaiting loved ones, and the civilian population can have safe access to due and urgent humanitarian aid."

The pope also urged people not to forget "battered Ukraine where so many people are dying every day."

Francis gave a shoutout to some young Ukrainians in the crowd gathered below in St. Peter's Square, thanking them for their commitment to helping those who are suffering due to the war.

The Ukrainians took part in a meeting in Rome organized by the Catholic community of Sant'Egidio with the theme "Overcome Evil with Good."

Pope Francis also made an appeal for disarmament, calling it "a moral duty" for the international community.

"How many resources are wasted on military expenditures, which, because of the current situation, sadly continue to increase," he said, noting that March 5 will mark the second International Disarmament and Nonproliferation Awareness Day.

"I sincerely hope that the international community understands that disarmament is first and foremost a duty; disarmament is a moral duty," he added. "This requires courage on the part of all members of the great family of nations to move from the balance of fear to the balance of trust."

French bishops lament country's enshrinement of abortion in constitution

By **DIEGO LOPEZ MARINA**
Catholic News Agency

BY a vote of 267-50, the French Senate this week approved a constitutional amendment to include women's recourse to abortion as a "guaranteed freedom."

In the wake of the vote on Monday, March 4, the amendment is expected to receive a final vote of approval at the Palace of Congresses in Versailles. If approved as expected, the country will become the first in the world to

specifically make abortion a right enumerated in its constitution.

"I committed to making women's freedom to abort irreversible, enshrining it in the Constitution," said French President Emmanuel Macron on X. "The Senate has taken a decisive step, which I welcome," he added.

In a Feb. 29 statement posted on X, the French Bishops' Conference said it was "saddened" by the senators' vote on the constitutional measure.

The bishops pointed out that abortion "remains an affront to life in its beginnings" and that "it

cannot be seen solely from the perspective of women's rights."

The prelates also regretted that the parliamentary debate "did not mention the measures to help those women and men who would like to keep their child."

"The bishops' conference will be vigilant with respect to the freedom of choice of parents who decide, even in difficult situations, to keep their child and the freedom of conscience of doctors and all health care personnel, whose courage and commitment it commends," the prelates concluded.

Bishop who participated in Freemasonry event affirms its incompatibility with Catholicism

By **NICOLAS DE CARDENAS**
Catholic News Agency

THE president of the Pontifical Academy of Theology, Bishop Antonio Stagliano, has reiterated the incompatibility of Catholics belonging to the Masons days after participating in an event organized by the Italian Grand Orient lodge in Milan.

Stagliano told Vatican News that "Freemasonry is a heresy that is fundamentally aligned with the Arian heresy" since it was Arius "who imagined that Jesus was a great architect of the universe"—the way Freemasons refer to God—"denying the divinity of Christ."

This idea of the "Architect of the Universe" is incompatible with the Catholic faith because "it is the fruit of human reasoning that tries to imagine a god, while the God of Catholics is the fruit of the very revelation of God in Christ Jesus!"

"In essence," the prelate continued, the Catholic faith "is the result of a historical event in which God became flesh, drew near to men, spoke to all human beings, and destined them for his salvation."

In explaining the total incompatibility between being a Catholic and a Mason, Stagliano pointed out that "within Freemasonry, plots involving secret powers develop that are in contradiction with Christian

action."

"In short," he added, "when we talk about incompatibility we are referring to profound contradictions."

Freemasonry vs. the Catholic Church

Stagliano noted some of the most obvious differences between Masonic and Catholic doctrine. For example, in reference to the concept of fraternity, the president of the Pontifical Academy of Theology stated that "our fraternity is established on the sacrament of the love of God in Jesus; it is founded on the Eucharist; not only on the generic idea of being brothers."

The Italian bishop pointed out that Christian charity "has

nothing to do with Masonic philanthropy" because "Christian charity is based on the historical event of a God who died and rose again for us and asks his children not to be merely philanthropic but to be, finally, crucified for love."

In addition, Freemasonry and Catholicism differ regarding the concept of mystery. While esotericism permeates Masonic teachings (such that they are only given to the initiated), in Catholic doctrine the mystery "hidden throughout the centuries does not cease to be a mystery but rather ceases to be hidden, because the mystery hidden throughout the centuries has been revealed," Stagliano explained.



The president of the Pontifical Academy of Theology, Bishop Antonio Stagliano, affirms that Freemasonry is incompatible with Catholicism. **PUBLIC DOMAIN**



Vatican Briefing

Pope Francis urges 'an immediate cease-fire in Gaza' that frees hostages, grants aid

"Enough!" "Stop!" Pope Francis repeated from the window of the Vatican's Apostolic Palace on Sunday as he called for Israel and Palestine to reach an agreement for "an immediate cease-fire in Gaza." Speaking in his Angelus address on March 3, the pope made an emotional plea for negotiations to reach a deal that both frees the hostages immediately and grants civilians access to humanitarian aid. "I carry daily in my heart, with sorrow, the suffering of the peoples in Palestine and Israel due to the ongoing hostilities," the pope said, reflecting on five months of war in Gaza. The pope made his appeal as negotiations are underway for a weeklong cease-fire between Israel and Hamas. President Joe Biden said last week that he believed that a cease-fire could go into effect as early as March 4. **(CNA)**

Pope Francis to the world's children: 'If we really want to be happy, we need to pray'

Pope Francis has issued a message to the world's children in anticipation of the Church's first-ever World Children's Day, which will take place in Rome from May 25-26, reminding them that the key to happiness lies in cultivating a prayer life and personal relationship with Christ, which in turn forms the basis of broader social action. "If we really want to be happy, we need to pray, to pray a lot, to pray every day, because prayer connects us directly to God. Prayer fills our hearts with light and warmth; it helps us to do everything with confidence and peace of mind," the pope wrote in his March 2 letter addressed to the world's children. Pope Francis announced the creation of World Children's Day last December, saying that it will be an event to bring children from all around the world together to reflect on the question of "What kind of world do we wish to pass on to the children who are growing up?" The Vatican's Dicastery for Culture and Education is sponsoring the initiative. **(CNA)**

Pope: Embrace your vulnerabilities

Addressing participants in the conference "The Chair of Welcome," on "vulnerability, and community between welcome and inclusion," Pope Francis described the programme of the conference as "rich and interesting." At the center of the conference, the Pope noted, was vulnerability "considered in all its forms." "I appreciate this choice," noted the pope. He invited those present to "remain firmly anchored in the Gospel, in Jesus, who did not teach his disciples to plan a care of the sick and the poor." It is in this way that the Holy Spirit forms men and women who became saints, explained the Pope, so that they love vulnerable people like Jesus. Concluding his address, Pope Francis notes that vulnerable people, "encountered and welcomed with Christ's grace and style, can be a gospel presence in the believing community and society." **(Vatican News)**

Pope pleads for just and lasting peace in Ukraine

Pope Francis lamented the deaths, injuries, destruction, anguish, and tears of the past two years since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine—a period, he said, "that is becoming terribly long and whose end is not yet in sight." In remarks following the Sunday Angelus, Feb. 25, the pope warned that the war in Ukraine "is not only devastating the region of Europe, but unleashing a global wave of fear and hatred." While renewing his "vivid sympathy" and prayers for "the tormented Ukrainian people," the Holy Father pleaded "for the recovery of that little bit of humanity that will allow the conditions for a diplomatic solution to be created in the search for a just and lasting peace." Pope Francis also urged people not to forget to pray for Palestine and Israel, and for the many people torn apart by the war, urging them to provide concrete assistance to those who are suffering, especially "the wounded, innocent children." **(Vatican News)**

Pope Francis: 'Today the ugliest danger is gender ideology'

Pope Francis on March 1 gave an address on the importance of building a culture that protects human and Christian vocations, things he suggested were at risk due to contemporary cultural challenges including gender ideology. "It is very important that there is this meeting, this meeting between men and women, because today the ugliest danger is gender ideology, which cancels out differences," the pope said during an audience with members of the French-based academic organization Research and Anthropology of Vocations Institute (CRAV). Gender ideology, which seeks to blur differences between men and women through movements such as transgenderism, "makes everything the same," Francis said. "Erasing differences is erasing humanity. Man and woman, however, are in a fruitful 'tension,'" Francis told the assembly, which is gathered in Rome for a two-day international conference titled "Man, Woman, Image of God: For an Anthropology of Vocations." **(CNA)**

Dicastery for Evangelization offers resource for Year of Prayer

The Vatican's Dicastery for Evangelization has issued a new resource on prayer aimed at inviting the faithful to "intensify prayer as a personal dialogue with God" and to reflect on their faith and commitment in today's world. The new guidebook, entitled Teach Us to Pray (Italian: "Insegnaci a pregare"), is the latest in a series of resources provided by the Dicastery to assist the Church as she prepares for the celebration of Jubilee 2025. Inspired by the authoritative teaching of Pope Francis, Teach Us to Pray consists of chapters dedicated to prayer in the parish and in the family; the prayer of young people; prayer in cloistered communities; catechesis; and spiritual retreats; and concludes with a section on "The prayer of the faithful for Jubilee 2025." According to a press release announcing the booklet, Teach Us to Pray is intended to offer "reflections, directions, and advice for living more fully in dialogue with the Lord, in relationship with others." **(Vatican News)**

Indian Cardinal Ferrão to head Asian bishops' conference amid Church's continued growth

By MATTHEW SANTUCCI
Catholic News Agency

CARDINAL Filipe Neri Ferrão, the archbishop of Goa and Daman, was elected as the new president of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) during the assembly's meeting in Bangkok, Thailand, on Feb. 22.

Ferrão, 71, will replace outgoing president Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, archbishop of Yangon, Myanmar, and his three-year term will start in January 2025.

The Goan prelate currently serves as president of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India, which is the national episcopal conference of the Latin rite in the country. This is a distinct body from the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, which is a supra-national assembly of Latin-rite bishops as well as the eparchial bishops from the Synod of the Syro-Malabar Church and the Synod of the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church.

Despite a sharp decline in Church membership in Western Europe and North America, amid a net increase in the global number of baptized Catholics, the Church in Asia has experienced continued growth.

According to 2021 figures released by the Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae, the statistics office of the Holy See, the total number of Catholics in Asia is 149.1 million, or 3.31% of the region, which has an estimated population of 4.5 billion people. However, out of the total number of religious sisters across the globe, 175,494, or 28.9%, live in Asia, and there was a 1% growth in the number of priests from 2019 figures.

The increase in the Catholic population in Asia and its growing importance on the global stage has also been reflected in Pope Francis' decision to expand representation to Asian countries in the College of Cardinals.

Currently, out of the 129 cardinal electors—cardinals under the age of 80 who are eligible to vote in a future conclave—22 come from Asia, giving the region the second-largest representation in the sacred body.

In the Aug. 27, 2022, consistory in which Ferrão received the red biretta, Mongolia, East Timor, Singapore, and South Korea all gained new cardinal electors. All four of the aforementioned

countries are represented in the FABC. Pope Francis made history as the first pontiff to visit the landlocked country of Mongolia in 2023.

During the last several years of Pope Francis' pontificate, there has also been renewed diplomatic activity in the region, evidenced by the 2023 agreement between the Holy See and Vietnam that allowed for permanent resident papal representatives in the country. That increased activity has also been evidenced in the recent flurry of episcopal appointments in the People's Republic of China, in accordance with the provisions of the Sino-Vatican Accord, which is up for renewal in October.

However, the Church in Asia is not without its problems, ranging from concerns over deteriorating religious freedom in Hong Kong to a fierce internal divide in the Syro-Malabar Church over the proper orientation of the celebrant during the Mass, a debate that prompted a papal intervention and ultimatum in December 2023.

In November 2023, Fides reported on Ferrão's remarks to a gathering of 300 Indian priests, religious, and seminarians in Rome where he reflected on the multicultural context of the Church in India, which he described as a "tapestry of beautiful cultures, languages, ethnicities, and rituals" while stressing the importance of maintaining a "solid cultural and national identity among Indian priests."

The FABC was established during a meeting of 180 Asian bishops in Manila, Philippines, on Nov. 29, 1970. Pope Paul VI, who was in the Philippine capital during his historic seven-day apostolic trip to Asia, Oceania, and Australia, spoke to the newly created assembly, praising it as a tangible example of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council and as representing a major step forward in the process of inculturation, or ecclesial localization.

The pan-Asian conference is currently made up of 17 episcopal conferences (representing 27 countries) as well as the Synod of the Syro-Malabar Church and the Synod of the Syro-Malankara Church as full members. It also counts the Diocese of Hong Kong, the Diocese of Macau (both special administrative regions of the People's Republic of



CARDINAL Filipe Neri Ferrão. CNA

China), and the Apostolic Vicariate of Nepal as associate members.

While the Chinese Regional Bishops' Conference, the episcopal conference of the Republic of China (Taiwan), is an associate member, the Bishops Conference of the Catholic Church in China, the episcopal conference for bishops in the People's Republic of China—which is not recognized by the Holy See—is not part of the body.

Ferrão was born in the village of Aldona, located in the northern part of the state of Goa on the country's western coast, in 1953. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1979 and, after serving in a variety of pastoral roles in his home diocese, he studied at the Pontifical Urban University, where he obtained a licentiate in biblical theology in 1988 and a licentiate in catechetics and pastoral theology from the Brussels-based Lumen Vitae International Institute in 1991.

He was appointed auxiliary bishop of Goa and Daman by Pope John Paul II in 1993, and in 2004 he was made archbishop of the same diocese, a position that also carries the titles of primate of the East and patriarch of the East Indies, given the historic importance of the city of Goa for the Portuguese Empire and as a gateway for the entry of Catholic missions into Asia from the early 16th century onward.

Ferrão is a polyglot and speaks Konkani (one of the 22 constitutionally recognized languages in India and the official language of the Indian state of Goa), English, Portuguese, Italian, French, and German.

New nuncio to Korea appointed

POPE Francis on March 2 appointed Archbishop Giovanni Gaspari as the new Apostolic Nuncio to Korea and Mongolia.

Gaspari succeeds Archbishop Alfred Xuereb, appointed Nuncio to Morocco last December.

Born on June 6, 1963 in Pescara, Italy, he was ordained a priest on July 4, 1987.

The archbishop studied Canon Law and has a Licentiate in Moral Theology.

He entered the Holy See's

Diplomatic Service in 2001, and has served at the Apostolic Nunciatures in Iran, Albania, Mexico, Lithuania and in the Section for Relations with States of the Vatican's Secretariat of State.

Since 2020, he has been serving as the Apostolic Nuncio to Angola and São Tomé and Príncipe in Africa and also titular archbishop of Alba Naritima.

Gaspari speaks English, Spanish and French. (CBCP News)

The official podcast of CBCP News, the news service of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines.

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Marian image in Edsa revolt honored with 'canonical crown'



Archbishop Charles Brown, Apostolic Nuncio to the Philippines, leads the canonical coronation of the national pilgrim image of Our Lady of Fatima at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Fatima in Valenzuela City on Feb. 25, 2024. SCREENSHOT FROM NSOLF VIDEO

A PILGRIM image of Our Lady of Fatima, which has been an iconic symbol of the 1986 peaceful revolution, was formally honored with pontifical coronation on Feb. 25, the 38th anniversary of the popular uprising.

The National Shrine of Our Lady of Fatima in Valenzuela City was filled with devotees on Sunday to witness the image's historic canonical coronation, with several bishops in attendance.

During the coronation rite, a Mass was celebrated by papal nuncio Archbishop Charles Brown, who praised the Filipinos' devotion to the Blessed Mother.

"Truly the Filipinos are Pueblo Amante de Maria, a people that loves Mary. We see that here in Valenzuela," Brown said.

In his homily, Bishop Dennis Villarojo of the Malolos diocese stressed that the coronation is Pope Francis' recognition of the image's significance in the life and faith of the people who venerate it.

"Some images are venerated because miracles are attributed to them. But we don't attribute a miracle to this image. Instead, this national pilgrim image of Our Lady of Fatima is a witness to a miracle," he said.

"What miracle? We need to be reminded, lest we forget from February 22 to 25, 1986, our people rose to reclaim their freedom and dignity without the use of violence and shedding of blood."

"During those days, Our Lady was present through this image not as a standard of battle but as a symbol of peace; not as talisman

for good fortune, but as a plea for justice," he said.

He emphasized that Edsa did not promise anything but was instead a fulfillment of Mary's promise of peace after the Filipinos "prayed, made reparations and consecrated their hearts (to Mary)."

But the bishop was quick to point out that the Edsa revolution was not a victory for one party and the defeat of another but "a particular instance of the triumph of the Immaculate Heart of Mary."

"Our Lady at Fatima gave us the formula for peace: prayer, penance, consecration and reparation," Villarojo said.

"Payer because it is our God who guides our feet into the way of peace. Penance because sin is the hindrance to peace. Consecration because our hearts need to be renewed. And reparation because justice is attained by repairing not by dismantling or demolishing," he added.

Among those present was Cardinal Jose Advincula of Manila, who led the congregation in praying the "Act of Consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary."

A canonical coronation is a special act designated by the pope where he allows the crowning of a Marian image. The crowning symbolizes the image's special significance to the universal Church.

To be granted with such Vatican recognition, a Marian image with a specific title must meet at least three conditions: antiquity, acclaimed by the faithful, and serving faith and hope in times of need. (CBCP News)

Pope Francis launches study groups to analyze Synod on Synodality's key issues



Pope Francis attends a session of the XVI General Assembly of the Synod on Synodality at the Paul VI Hall in the Vatican, Oct. 23, 2023. ROY LAGARDE/CBCP NEWS

By COURTNEY MARES

VATICAN— The Vatican announced Feb. 17 that Pope Francis has launched synodal study groups to analyze key issues ahead of October's Synod on Synodality assembly.

Pope Francis has issued a chirograph asking the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia to collaborate with the General Secretariat of the Synod to establish the study groups for "in-depth analysis" of some of the themes that emerged in the first Synod on Synodality assembly.

The pope did not specify in the chirograph published on Feb. 17 how many groups will be formed, what topics will be studied, or who will participate in the study groups.

The synthesis report published at the end of the first synod assembly lists 75 different "matters for consideration," including women's access to diaconal ministry, priestly celibacy, and "Eucharistic hospitality" for interfaith couples.

These "matters of consideration,"

which could not find a consensus in the first synod assembly, are defined as "points on which we have recognized that it is necessary to continue theological, pastoral, and canonical deepening."

In addition, the synthesis report also calls for the establishment of a "special intercontinental commission of theologians and canonists" to examine the definition and conceptual understanding of the "idea and practice of synodality" and its canonical implications, as well as the establishment of a joint commission of Eastern and Latin theologians, historians and canonists.

According to Vatican News, the study groups will require a substantial amount of time and will not "directly constitute the material up for discussion in the next session of the Synod, which will focus on synodality itself."

The General Secretariat of the Synod, led by Cardinal Mario Grech, will coordinate the work of the study groups among the dicasteries, which will "involve experts from all continents" following a synodal process, the Vatican's

state media outlet said.

The Vatican also announced on Saturday the dates for the second Synod on Synodality assembly and the appointment of six new consulters to the General Secretariat of the Synod.

The 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops's second session will take place from Oct. 2 to Oct. 27. The participants in the assembly will arrive in Rome on Sept. 29 to participate in a two-day spiritual retreat ahead of the start of the assembly.

Among the new synod consulters, Pope Francis chose three female professors.

Dr. Tricia Bruce, a sociology professor at Maryville College in Tennessee and president-elect of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, and Dr. Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer, a theology professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, are both appointees.

As is Sister Dr. Birgit Weiler, a German missionary in Peru and theology professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru. Weiler is a member of the Congregation of the Medical Missionary Sisters and has lived in Peru for more than 35 years, where she works with the Episcopal Council of Latin America (CELAM) and the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network (REPAM).

The other appointees are Monsignor Alphonse Borrás, a Belgian canon lawyer and specialist in the theology of the diaconate; Father Gilles Routhier, a professor of religious studies at Laval University in Quebec; and Father Ormond Rush, a theology professor at Australian Catholic University. Rush addressed the first synod assembly in October with a speech that focused on Vatican II's discussion of tradition as the authority for the Synod on Synodality.



A BUCKET OF WATER

BISHOP REX ANDREW C. ALARCON

Synodality: A radical invitation

SYNODALITY appears to be a benign word, yet it is also a strong word—a radical invitation. Pope Francis' call for Synodality is a call to conversion.

What is radical is that it does not only call for individual conversion, but more so, an institutional, or better, an ecclesial conversion.

Pope Francis himself has declared that even the Papacy needs conversion. This is a bold and courageous statement. He has called for the conversion of the Roman Curia. He recalls Paul VI's invitation to a deeper kind of renewal which is concerned not only of individual but the entire church. This is a call for self-examination and self-renewal of the Church. "Christ summons the Church as she goes her pilgrim way... to that continual reformation of which she always has need, in so far as she is a human institution here on earth" (*Gaudium et Spes* #20)

Pope Francis further says, and this has been repeatedly quoted: "I dream of a "missionary option", that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation." (*Gaudium Evangelii* #27) This is to avoid a kind of 'ecclesial introversion'

The invitation is just not simply reform, but rather, a journey to conversion. Conversion is deeper and more radical than mere reform.

Synodality is also a way of being Church in the 21st Century. If we are critical of ourselves, and we should be, the processes, expressions and values of Synodality are not new. In reality, a good number of them have already been operative in secular institutions. Take for example stakeholderism—listening and dialoguing with everyone before making a decision; inclusivity, interdependence, co-responsibility, participatory governance. Many secular institutions have already left behind a command and control way of doing things in favor of 'trust and inspire' approach, consensus-based procedures. Listening by way of getting constant feedbacks is a normal and necessary task.

Much of these however, remains to be seen in our ecclesial institutions and organizations. While feedback is the mode of the day, many of our ecclesial institutions and leaders are averse to feedbacks and rarely ask for them. While adhering to common standards have become a norm in secular institutions, common standards are still much to be desired in many of our organizations, parishes and dioceses. While robust discussion, transparency and accountability, lifestyle checks are demands in the secular world, we seem to be yet making baby steps in these aspects. While co-responsibility and interdependence have become modes of doing, we are yet to follow through our pastoral breakthroughs in empowering our laity.

We need to develop a healthy autonomy, even among dioceses, congregations, parishes, and schools –to name a few, towards a fuller sense of communion and synergy in mission. Pope Francis himself speaks of a 'healthy decentralization' in reference to national and regional conferences of bishops. And certainly, a healthy and solid exercise of collegiality, effective and affective, among brother bishops is a *conditio sine qua non* for universal Synodality. For if the bishop is a principle of unity, the unity and collegiality among bishops should be fundamental. Autonomy, if unhealthy, hurts unity and is against the principle of Communion, and therefore contrary to Synodality.

While we say we care for our people, yet there is much to be desired in our brand of human resource management and development. While we continue to proclaim our desire to be a Church for the poor and preference for those at the margins, we still lack basic structures and mechanisms that evidence and realize such aspiration. Public places have spaces for the seniors and the handicapped, while we have yet to install them in many of our churches and institutions.

While the wider educational landscape continues to experience leaps and advances, seminary formation needs to seriously ask whether it is responsive to current realities. While other professions have long been advocating continuing professional development,

A bucket of water / A6

AACH

DOLJOON
CHURCH

Editorial

A paradigm of greed

THE long list of local communities devastated by calamities is getting longer by the day. But these calamities, like the recent flooding in Mindanao that claimed lives and property, is not caused by "natural disaster alone" or so says Caritas Philippines in its recent call for a nationwide moratorium on mining.

"The recent devastation in Mindanao is not a natural disaster alone. It's a man-made tragedy fueled by greed and irresponsible practices. Weak governance, political dynasties, and rampant mining have created a ticking bomb, and it just exploded," said Caritas Philippines Vice President Bishop Gerardo Alminaza.

Well-meaning Filipinos know this. This is not just a persistent clamor of pro-environmentalists. This is common knowledge—just like graft and corruption has become a bad habit of the same leaders that keeps getting voted every election. Even former President Rodrigo Duterte knew this. When he assumed office in 2016, he was strongly vocal of his opposition to mining which he blamed for degrading the environment. He imposed ban on open-pit mining in 2017 and appointed Gina Lopez as DENR Secretary. Lopez ordered the closure and/or suspension of permits for 26 mining operations found in violation of environmental regulations.

But it was short-lived. A new paradigm

of environmental governance took over.

By 2019, Duterte had opted to keep quiet over mining. Lopez was booted out of office and DENR's MGB pushed for the opening of mines that according to them was "shuttered" by Lopez; the likes of OceanaGold-operated Didipio Gold Mines in Nueva Vizcaya whose permit lapsed that year. The wind of change in the Palace may have been triggered by the dictates of China who turned to the Philippines to fill-in the heavy demand for nickel when Indonesia, the world's biggest nickel producer, imposed an export ban on the metal in January 2020. When this happened, the Philippines became the number one exporter of nickel, exporting 333,962 tons of this metal that year.

It was no wonder why at the peak of the pandemic, Philippine government under Duterte then allowed the continuance of operations of the mining industry and therefore the entry to the Philippine waters of ships that mostly came from China, despite the strictest government lockdowns of travel by land, air and sea. In Homonhon island alone, where Magellan first landed 500 years ago but today is being ravaged by three companies of miners, fleets of ships hauled minerals amid the pandemic, in complete disregard to the strict health protocol of the Department of Health that merely winked and turned a blind eye in

double-standard hypocrisy.

According to the Australian Trade and Investment Commission, the Philippines is a top 20 metal producer in terms of exports, but is ranked 5th as the most mineralized country in the world. According to the Philippines' Mines and Geosciences Bureau (MGB) in its August 2021 primer, about 9 million hectares of the country's land area are of high mineral potential, with a large portion of these areas remain untapped. But according to some well-meaning Filipinos these areas are now the target of unmoderated greed.

While Philippine Statistics Office show that the mining industry has contributed a measly 0.76% of the Philippines' GDP in 2020, the government keeps showing a veneer that the industry's contribution to the coffers will be alleviating millions of lives of Filipinos due to its supposed increased earnings from excise tax collection attributed to the Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion (TRAIN) which "doubled the rate of excise tax on minerals, mineral products and quarry resources from 2% to 4%.

Even if the total revenue landscape of the country is going to become rosy with the mining taxes, which of course is a lie, that still is not going to tip the imbalance of what mining industry's impact to the consequent ill-health of Filipinos and of the environment.



ALONG THE WAY

FR. AMADO L. PICARDAL, CSsR, STD

Falling birth rate

OVER sixty years ago, the Philippines had a total fertility rate of 6.8 birth woman which led to a rapid increase in the population. In 2017, the total fertility rate dropped to 2.7 and since 2022, this has fallen to 1.9 (2.2 in the rural areas and 1.7 in the urban areas) which is below the 2.1 replacement level. So, from 26 million Filipinos in 1960, there are now over 115 million and the population is expected to continue growing for the next two to three decades until it reaches its peak several decades from now.

For those who are worried about the effects of overpopulation, a falling birth rate is good news. There are many who believe that too many people are a strain to the country's resources and to the environment. Overpopulation can lead to famine, starvation and wars. It prevents progress and perpetuates poverty. Exponential population growth outstrips food production which is linear and arithmetical. The earth is not capable of supporting billions of people. This was the warning of the neo-Malthusian proponent Paul Ehrlich whose book *Population Bomb* published in 1968 had an alarming effect worldwide and influenced the policies of the UN and many governments. Later, many environmental activists would also assert that overpopulation contributes to climate change.

This view has led to widespread belief

that limiting the size of families or the number of children that come into the world is a solution to the problems caused by overpopulation. This was the primary rationale not only of the Reproductive Health Law (passed in 2012) but also the population control/family planning campaign of the Marcos dictatorial regime since 1972 which promoted birth control pills, condoms, tubal ligation, vasectomy, sterilization and IUD. Abortion, although illegal in the country, has been tolerated (estimates range from 500,000 to 1 million abortions annually). Some liberal and progressive groups continue to advocate for the decriminalization and legalization of abortion following most of the countries in the world.

Thus, for many, a falling birth rate is an indicator of how successful the population control policies and the Reproductive Law have been in addressing overpopulation. There are also various factors for the declining fertility rate: urbanization, higher education, changing gender roles, the need for women to work or pursue a career, high cost of raising children, marrying late in life, materialism, individualism, changing cultural norms and mindsets influenced by liberal values, contraceptive mentality, abortion, anxiety about the future. Behind all these is the view that a child is a burden and a threat.

A declining birth rate is not only happening in the Philippines. It has

become a global phenomenon. It started in the developed countries in Western Europe, North America many decades ago and has spread rapidly in Asia and Latin America. Majority of the countries are now below the 2.1 replacement level. The effects of low fertility rate have become evident in the major industrialized countries with an ageing and shrinking population. The average fertility rate in Europe is 1.53 with Italy and Spain having the lowest (1.2.) and France with 1.8. Russia has 1.3. The US has 1.7. The Asian average is 1.93. Japan has 1.3 and South Korea .8 which is the lowest in the world. China's one child policy has led to 1.1 fertility rate. India, which has overtaken China as the world's largest population has 2.0 which is still below replacement level. It is only in Africa that has 5.0 birth rate but this is expected to decline in the coming decades.

The falling fertility rate and subsequent population decline is difficult if not impossible to reverse. It can only be slowed down and stabilized temporarily. The existential crisis the world is facing is not only climate change. The irreversible population decline is another crisis that threatens the survival of the species as population collapse becomes a reality before the end of the 21st century. Population explosion or overpopulation is not the problem. Paul Ehrlich's

Along the way / A6

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PUBLIC THEOLOGY

FR. DANIEL FRANKLIN E. PILARIO, C.M.

Catholic schools:
'Education that goes forth'

POPE Francis' most recent document on education was issued on 25 January 2022. The basic question it wanted to answer is what is the basic identity and mission of Catholic schools in our times. The title of the document gives a hint to: "The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue". The Vatican document treats of many things: the school shares in the Church's identity as "*mater et magistra*" (mother and teacher) of all peoples; the varied roles of different stakeholders and the canonical provisions referring to these responsibilities; and some critical aspects that beset Catholic schools today.

Let me focus on the main point Pope Francis wanted to say in this document: that Catholic education is an "education that goes forth". This is part of Pope Francis' whole program of a "Church that goes forth".

I would like to say from the outset that education is not about us nor about our Catholic identity. It is about the other. Or better still, the Catholic identity of our schools is found in "going forth to the other".

Jesus did not come proclaiming himself, that he is the Son of God or Messiah. He came to heal the sick, to welcome sinners, to liberate the oppressed. Only later did people realize and acclaim him as the Messiah. If our schools would like to follow Jesus, this is our Christian identity: a school for the other.

What makes a Catholic school "Catholic"?

There are reductive views of Catholic school identity which Pope Francis denies. First, a school is not Catholic because it is run by priests of religious nuns or because they have Catholic liturgies celebrated regularly. Beyond personalities and

activities, it should be clear that the whole school community—from its vision-mission, to administration and personnel—places the Gospel and all that it demands as the center of its identity. It does not just use the "Catholic" label for advertising purposes and function like another other business enterprise.

Second, there is a "formalistic" view. It is true that a decree from the competent ecclesiastical authority (e.g., the Bishop or Bishops Conference) is necessary to grant it legitimacy as provided for in the canon law and civil law. "No institute, even if it is Catholic, cannot bear the name of 'Catholic school' without the consent of competent ecclesiastical authority" (CIC 216, 803). But this merely fulfills its formalistic requirements. Though basic, this does not guarantee its real Catholic identity. Approval of from Catholic hierarchy can be useful if you are unjustly closed down by a bishop, for example. This gives you canonical rights to argue for your existence in the higher levels of the church hierarchy. But a mere document alone does not give you your Catholic identity.

Opposite to this formalistic requirement is the "charismatic view". Some people say what is important is the "Catholic spirit" or "Christian inspiration", not canonical approval. This is also insufficient. In some secular and pluralistic contexts, the term "Catholic" is avoided in the name of inclusivity. Schools do not want to be identified as "Catholic"; it sounds too sectarian and not open enough to other persuasions. In Europe, for instance, in order to welcome non-Catholics sensitivities, we should not flaunt our "Catholic identity". But the situation is opposite in the

Philippines. To be "Catholic" in the Philippines is a plus factor, also read as economic factor. In both uses, "Catholic identity" does not point to the real thing.

The last reductive version of Catholic education is the "closed view". In these schools, there is no room for those who are non-Catholics. If non-Catholics are accepted, they are not given a space for respect of belief and dialogue. Though we need to proclaim the Catholic faith among our students, we should foster an "open Catholic school", the document says, not a "closed one"—one that is in dialogue with different faiths, different cultures and religions. I know of some Catholic schools in Muslim-dominated areas which has two departments of religious education for their different students. Muslim imams and Catholic catechists are fully employed faculty members to teach their respective religions. And on some special occasions, they have joint recollections. Other schools have prayer rooms for other faiths as well.

In short, Catholic education should be one "that goes forth". The over-emphasis on "canonical requirement" or "Catholic clientele" without openness to plural and interreligious contexts is a poor view of Catholic education. It is inward-looking and places us in a self-survival mode.

This is what Pope Francis calls the sins of "self-referentiality" and "logic of exclusion". In the self-referential mode, education aims at preserving ourselves at the expense of dialogue and care for real persons on the ground. It makes our "systems" and "policies" more important than the needs of real persons.

Public Theology / A6



VIVAT!

RENE V. SARMIENTO

A 'Laudato Si' afternoon with sea turtles

POPE Francis's "Laudato Si" pulsed with vigorous life at the Pawikan Hatchery (PAWICARE) and West Philippine Sea, San Narciso, Zambales last February 22, 2024.

The Board of Trustees and staff of the Knights of Columbus Fraternal Association of the Philippines, Inc. (KCFAPI), including its Spiritual Director Msgr. Pepe Quitonio, after declaring a brief respite from its regular monthly meeting at the scenic mini-forest called Hiyas ng Kalikasan, nestled right in the heart of San Narciso, Zambales, trooped to PAWICARE to listen to lectures about sea turtles ("pawikans") and to witness the release of ninety (90) newly-born hatchlings.

Thanks to environmentalists Mayor La Rainne Abad-Sarmiento, Giovanni Resolme of the municipality's Tourism Office and PAWICARE President Ray Relaniza, Sr. for the informative lectures!

After the lectures, the eager Knights walked toward the shore to witness the release of hatchlings by PAWICARE's fishermen-sea rangers, commencing with Msgr. Pepe Quitonio's prayer of thanksgiving for the hatchlings and a prayer for safety in their homeward journey.

What are sea turtles?

Sea turtles are reptiles, a clan of vertebrate animals that have survived for more than 200 million years and have been alive longer than mammals, birds, crocodiles, snakes, and lizards.

Marine scientists say that sea

turtles are one of the very few animals that eat seagrass. Sea grass needs to be constantly cut short to be healthy, and sea turtles cut the grass short and help maintain the health of the seagrass.

Sea grass beds are important because they provide breeding and nurturing grounds for many species of fish, shellfish and crustaceans. Without sea grass feeds, many marine species that we humans harvest can be lost. The food chain will be prejudiced. It is therefore important to protect and preserve sea turtles. Seven species of sea turtles are threatened with extinction because of poaching, egg gathering, slaughter, illegal fishing and ocean pollution.

Lower temperatures, stronger waves and longer nights usher the sea turtles nesting season in the coastal barangays of Zambales and several Western Luzon coasts. San Narciso, Zambales is one of the only three areas in Western Luzon coasts where an ongoing pawikan protection and conservation program can be found.

By dictates of nature, mother sea turtles after traveling in so many parts of the world's oceans, return to their birthplace to lay their eggs and marine scientists call this process "natal homing" or "natal philopatry."

I call this "natal homing" one of God's miracles.

TARA NA! Let us, between October and March of every year, visit PAWICARE, San Narciso, Zambales!



CURRENTS

FR. EMMANUEL L. ALFONSO, SJ

GOMBURZA:
An insider's view

"SALAMAT po sa JesCom sa pagsusugal sa akin (Thank you to JesCom for taking a risk on me)." That was the opening line of Cedric Juan as he accepted the "Best Actor" award at the Metro Manila FilmFest's Gabi ng Parangal. Cedric Juan played the lead role as Padre Jose Burgos in Jesuit Communications' GOMBURZA, which ended up the most awarded film that night with seven prizes including Best Director and Best Actor. GOMBURZA would also spur animated discussion on Facebook and Instagram on various critical topics like nationalism, justice, or the value of history and historiography.

Since hitting the theaters in December last year, many things have already been said about the film by movie critics, historians, academicians and blogging moviegoers. Let me add this piece. After all, it was Jesuit Communications, the media arm of the Jesuits in the Philippines, that produced the film. And let me lead off from our best actor's word "sugal," which means to gamble or to risk. And for Jesuit Communications, not only on account of the cast and crew, but on account of the whole film, it was all a risk, a gamble.

GOMBURZA was JesCom's second foray into film-making. The first one was IGNACIO DE LOYOLA: Soldier, Sinner, Saint, which came out in 2016. Our objective then was simply to satisfy a very special need. Jesuit schools here and abroad had been complaining that for their orientation sessions for freshmen students, they were still showing an old biopic of Ignatius, founder of the Jesuits and

patron of all our schools, which was in Spanish and in black-and-white. The film was produced in the 50s and so an updated one was urgently needed. As G.K. Chesterton said, "anything worth doing is worth doing badly!" And so for this worthwhile cause, we embarked on our film project. The greatest challenge of course was funding. JesCom was really a small media organization. Before this P50-million enterprise, JesCom's biggest project was a film-for-TV by the great Marilou Diaz-Abaya which only cost P5 million. IGNACIO was certainly a huge leap. But through the help of many Jesuit provinces and local benefactors, we pulled it off. Shot almost entirely in Spain, with English-speaking Spanish actors, the film looked and sounded like an international quality film. And it became a surprise hit. It stayed in Philippine theaters for seven weeks (a feat in itself), was exhibited internationally (still going around Latin America today) and received awards and recognitions here and abroad. But most importantly it became a resource or reference material for our schools and universities. Surprisingly though it appealed not only to Jesuit circles but to a greater public, churched or unchurched.

IGNACIO was definitely a winning bet. But it was for us a huge risk. The late Nick Cruz, SJ, warned me then about how financially dangerous film-making was. In fact, he shared that when he himself experimented on a film project, he had to borrow P2 million from a bank and secretly gave Ateneo de Manila campus as collateral

for the loan. Fortunately, I didn't have to go that way. But his story gave me sleepless night.

IGNACIO was our gift to the Jesuits, GOMBURZA would be our offering to the Philippine Church. When we started the project in 2018 the Catholic Church at that time was preparing for the 2021 celebration of the Church's 500 years of existence in the country. The film was to be our contribution to this milestone event. The political context then also gave further depth and meaning to our undertaking. President Rodrigo Duterte was very critical of the Catholic Church. He had cursed Pope Francis when the latter's 2015 visit caused huge traffic in Manila. He also said that the Christian God was stupid for embracing suffering on the cross despite his power. Finally, he opined that there would be no reason to celebrate 2021 for the Catholic faith was merely accepted by the natives through the Spanish conquistador's force and intimidation. The Church, he said, was an instrument of oppression and would soon become obsolete.

When we finally opted to make the film on GOMBURZA, it was to correct these ignorant and revisionist interpretations of this would-be intellectual. In fact, John Schumacher, who was the main source of our research for the film, asserts that in the martyrdom of GOMBURZA and in many other incidents, the Church proved its important role in the emergence of the Philippine nation. Or as a national artist would say, their execution became pivotal

Currents / A7



AND THAT'S THE TRUTH

TERESA R. TUNAY, OCDS

Not to abolish,
but to fulfil

READERS, please bear with me as I share with you an "Aha! moment" triggered by the word "fulfil".

Reading Matthew 5:17-20, it dawned on me that Jesus's words "Do not presume that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfil" represent a pivotal moment in salvation history. But try asking the average churchgoer (your pew-mate at Mass, for instance) to name the most important events in the life of Jesus and chances are "Christmas" will be the most popular reply, followed by "Christmas and Holy Week". You can't blame them—after all the Philippines is equally famous and notorious for celebrating the longest Christmas season—and the bloodiest Holy Week ever—in the whole world.

Consider this: it was an angel who told of His birth (to the shepherds); it was also an angel who announced His resurrection (to the women at the tomb). But at this crucial moment it is not just an angel but the Son of God Himself proclaiming that He has come to fulfil God's promises. To fulfil, yes! The infant who

lay in a manger and before whom three kings knelt, the baby who escaped Herod's massacre; the 12-year old boy who stunned the teachers at the temple with his brilliance! Indeed, the carpenter's son has grown up, now a miracle worker, here in flesh, blood and bone, to fulfil! Isn't that simply marvelous?

Christmas and Holy Week are indeed central to the Christian faith, but Matthew 5:17-20 represents a foundational moment in Jesus' teachings—it sets the stage for His ministry and mission. It highlights the fulfillment of God's plan for redemption through Jesus Christ and the establishment of a new covenant between God and humanity—that's huge!

While spectacular celebrations and commemorations mark Christmas and Holy Week in our society, I believe a deeper understanding of Matthew 5:17-20, can greatly enrich the faithful's appreciation of Jesus's mission, inspire us to live out His teachings in daily life, and gently bring back love in a world on the brink of self-destruction. And that's the truth.

Bishop Rapadas shares vision for BECs

THE new head of the bishops' ministry for Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC) indicated his active engagement in programs and movements that promote ecology and environment conservation.

Bishop Jose Rapadas of Iligan shared his vision in a video message on Wednesday as he assumed his role as chairman of the CBCP Episcopal Commission on BEC.

"By embracing an ecological perspective, I believe it can inspire sustainable practices promoting stewardship of the environment and fostering a culture of integral ecology," Rapadas said.

BEC is a generic term that refers to the small faith communities that have emerged at the grassroots.

Through the BEC, the bishop believes ordinary people, especially the poor, can actively participate in the process of social transformation.

"With the poor and the marginalized, the BECs provide spaces for voices to be heard, empowering them to actively participate in the life and mission of the church," Rapadas said.

"I witnessed first hand the



Screenshot from Bishop Jose Rapadas' Feb. 21 video message for the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) in the Philippines.

transformative power of the BECs in fostering holistic growth and human development in the communities. So I am a believer of BECs," he added.

According to him, the BEC "truly represents a participatory way" for bishops, priests, and laypeople as they embark on the synodal journey.

The CBCP, during their plenary

assembly last month, elected Rapadas as their point person for promoting BECs in the country.

"In the spirit of synodality, I look forward to working closely with the commission, the dioceses, parishes and BEC coordinators to ensure that this vision becomes a reality in our Church," he said. **(CBCP News)**

A bucket of water / A4

our ongoing formation needs much push, determination and structures. And while there is greater interdisciplinarity among specialists, the tendency among us to work alone and in isolation is still strong. Sadly, rigidity and closed mindedness are descriptions we often hear about ourselves and Church groups.

Thus, in a sense, the our synodal efforts are ways of catching up with the demands of the world today. If previously the Church set the standards, now it seems the reverse. Besides, part of ecclesial conversion is the humble admission that we do not have all the answers to the questions of the day. It is not surprising that then Pope Francis counsels us to resist the temptation of maintaining a status-quo mentality and self-referential attitude, but instead to be open and to listen. In the 21st century, the pilgrim Church journeys in multiple, plural and diverse world. The missionary frontiers have shifted from the vast oceans to the digital sphere.

What is new is that we are attempting to be Synodal as a Universal Church. This is a conversion of great extent. But this begins with the conversion of parishes, seminaries, schools, organizations, diocesan curia, diocesan commissions, of episcopal conferences, etc. This is the conversion of communities.

Synodality, therefore, is not a concern or work of a single person, but of a community and communities. We are seeing and re-appreciating the value and our need for a community. Thus, in relation to what was said earlier, this is call to conversion of communities as it is

a journey towards what the Church is—*Communio*.

The scope and magnitude of our present-day issues, concerns, problems and dilemmas are such that no individual person, unit, organization or country is able to resolve. And so the summons to greater fraternity, that is, we are all brothers and sisters.

Synodality is a call to opening doors and windows. It is about going out and going further to seek others. It about unlearning and relearning. Alvin Toffler once said, and this can be related to our Synodal efforts: *"The illiterate of the twenty-first century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn."*

Back in the 1990's, during the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, it was already said: *"The pilgrim, however, is not only an individual, but rather an entire people. Conversion then requires the renewal of people's relationships and their social structures. By reason of our pilgrimage to the kingdom of God, we need to change our own hearts and the social, economic, political and cultural systems that have promoted massive poverty and inequity."* (PCP II #273)

Synodality invites us to revisit our aspirations as a Church in the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines. Much of the values and expressions of Synodality were already our aspirations during the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II), held in 1991, documented in the Conciliar Document and in many of our diocesan synods which followed PCP II.

It is good to note that even the pillars of Synodality—*communio, participation and mission*, have already been highlighted in PCP II. In the section *"Discipleship in Community"* of the conciliar document, one finds this: *The Church is Communio* (See nos. 89-97), *Participation* (nos. 98-101), *Community in Mission* (nos. 102-115).

In this Season of Lent, may our Synodal efforts be genuine opportunities for ecclesial conversion. For we cannot be Synodal if we are not open to conversion, both individual and ecclesial. Conversion begins with humble self-examination and subsequently requires action. A post in social media says: *'Vision without execution is hallucination.'*

Synodality is a kind word, yet it is also radical invitation - a call to conversion. The words of PCP II are a timely reminder:

"In order to be a renewed Church, we must leave behind many ways of thinking, speaking and acting which no longer effectively serve and perhaps even obstruct our evangelizing mission. This will mean an unsettling pain, a disengagement from what is cherished but is now obsolete or obstructive, a dying to what is sinful, that we may come to the newness of life. And even when we do our best in fidelity to our Lord, the Church is bound to meet with opposition and even persecution. Both in our internal renewal therefore, and in our service to society, the Lord's community of disciples in the Philippines is destined to share in His passion and death so that she may also share his risen life." (PCP II #143)

Public Theology / A5

We do not care whether people are truly helped or respected, in their differences, as long as our doctrines, policies and traditions are conserved.

Against self-referential education, Pope Francis encourages education that is a

part of "Church that goes forth", "standing by people at every step of the way", an education in solidarity with others. If you want to use another image by Pope Francis, our schools should be seen as "field hospitals". In a world of violence and victims

are all over the place, we should be able to welcome the victims, even if our resources are limited. Field hospitals do not have all the supplies and the best laboratories. But they need to treat the victims of war as they come. So do with our schools.

La Salle launches 'Evangelization and Catechetical Institute'

THE Lasallian Institute for Evangelization and Catechesis was formally launched at De La Salle University (DLSU) in Manila on Feb. 27.

Inspired by the Church's call to discover new paths and creative ways of proposing the Gospel, the institute aims to be a resource for evangelization and catechesis not just in the country but in Asia as well.

Among those present during the launch was Archbishop Salvatore Fisichella, Pro-Prefect of the Dicastery for Evangelization's Section for Fundamental Questions regarding Evangelization in the World.

Fisichella reiterated the Church's efforts to reinvent the catechetical ministry through the Directory for Catechesis published in 2020 and Pope Francis' motu proprio "Antiquum Ministerium".

The Vatican official stressed that in these documents, primacy belongs to evangelization.

He also praised the work of the La Salle Brothers in the Philippines and their dedication to education in the faith and in forming leaders for the ministry of evangelization and catechesis.

He challenged the religious congregation and Lasallian partners to rediscover their tradition of being "experts in catechesis."

Br. Raymundo Suplido, Chair of the Board of the Institute, recounted that for over a century, the Brothers of Christian Schools in the Philippines have dedicated themselves to their founder's charism of teaching minds, touching hearts, and transforming lives.

He further emphasized that in the 16 Lasallian education institutions in the country, faith formation is always at the forefront.

Suplido stressed that they have "sought to bring together the work of evangelization and the pursuit of growth in technology



Bishop Daniel Presto, chairman of the CBCP Episcopal Commission on Catechesis and Catholic Education and Br. Raymundo Suplido, chairman of the Br. Andelino Manuel Castillio Religious Education Foundation (BAMCREF), during the launching of the journal titled "Mystagogia: A Journal of Evangelization, Catechesis, and Religious Education" at De La Salle University in Manila on Jan. 29. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

and culture."

Through the launching of the Institute, he said that the Lasallian family reaffirms its commitment to actively participate in the Church's work of evangelization and catechesis.

Br. Armin Luistro, Superior General of the De La Salle Brothers, joined the community in renewing its commitment to the work of evangelization and catechesis.

"Beyond a simple change of name, it marks a new direction for the Center in view of the principles laid out in the Directory for Catechesis," Luistro said in his message, which was read during the ceremony.

"More importantly for our Institute, it is also a response to the call... to return to our roots and the legacy of St. John Baptist de La Salle... that the life and the educational activity of the Brothers are an integral part of the Church's work of evangelization," the former DLSU president added.

Originally established in 1952 as the De La Salle Catechetical Center, the institute is gearing itself to research, pastoral laboratory work, and the continuous formation of leaders in catechetical and other pastoral ministries. Dr. Lysander Rivera will lead the institute. **(CBCP News)**

Along the way / A4

alarmist prediction that hundreds of millions of people would die of starvation due to population explosion has not come true. The global population has reached over 8 billion people and this will peak to 10.4 billion or less sixty years from now. This will be followed by a rapid decline which is irreversible. Many countries have already reached its peak especially those whose birth rate started falling thirty to forty years ago. Paul Ehrlich's prediction of population explosion has not come to pass. Instead, the world is facing a threat of population collapse that could lead to mass extinction if this trend continues. This is the dire warning of many demographers.

It could take many decades for this to happen. What are the immediate problems caused by an ageing and shrinking population? Many economists point to economic stagnation and decline. This is now happening in Europe, Japan, China and other rich industrial nations. The global capitalist economic system is growth-driven and dependent on mass consumption. This means a shrinking market and less consumer demand. There will also be a shortage of labor as the working age population shrink. The younger people will have difficulty supporting the elderly which will outnumber them. Tax revenues will continue to fall and would not suffice for government spending on social security and health care and to pay ballooning debts.

To address the problems caused by falling birth-rate and declining population many governments in the developed nations have adopted pronatalist policies: financial rewards and tax-exemption for couples to have more children, longer maternity and paternity leaves, affordable child-care, flexible work-places, better state-run schools, etc. China has abandoned the one-child policy and adopted three-children policy

per family. So far, none of these measures have led to an increase in fertility rate higher than 2.1 replacement level.

An immediate solution to a shrinking population and workforce is to encourage immigration from countries who are not yet experiencing population decline. This is a what is happening in Western Europe and North America. Thus, the demand for immigrants and migrant workers will continue to rise.

The Philippines which has the 13th largest population in the world continues to reap the demographic dividend. Twelve million Filipinos have left the country as OFWs to fill the demand for workers and beef up the population in the developed countries. Their remittances have contributed to the economy and improved the standard of living of many families although this has also led to a brain drain. This is the blessing of overpopulation. But this will not last as the country will also experience the effect of a falling birth rate in the next 20 to 30 years and will experience the same fate as those in the developed nations.

An abortive, contraceptive mentality has contributed to the demographic crisis. People have to be reminded that children are not burden or a threat. They are the future and hope of humanity. The more people there are the better. They are the greatest resource to every nation and capable of innovation and addressing other threats like climate change and starvation. Being prolife—treasuring the sacredness of life and promoting the traditional values of marriage and family—can save the planet and is more sustainable.

The challenge for governments, civil society and the Church is to become aware of the existential threat of population decline, find ways to mitigate it and prepare for a world with an ageing and shrinking population.

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Cebu archdiocese to host 5th Asian Apostolic Congress on Mercy in October



The official logo of the 5th Asian Apostolic Congress on Mercy in October.

FIRST held in Manila in 2009, a gathering aimed at strengthening and promoting devotion to Divine Mercy throughout Asia is returning to the Philippines this year.

The Archdiocese of Cebu announced this week it is hosting the 5th Asian Apostolic Congress on Mercy (AACOM), with the theme "Divine Mercy: Pilgrimage of Hope in Asia."

About 5,000 participants are expected to attend the event that will

be held at the IC3 Pavilion in Cebu City from October 14 to 19.

Imma Alfon, the lay coordinator of Divine Mercy Philippines-Archdiocese of Cebu, said they have allotted 1,000 slots for delegates from outside the country.

She also said that 1,000 slots are allotted for participants in each of the Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao regions, with the remaining 1,000 reserved for delegates from Cebu.

Held once every three years, AACOM

is an Asian gathering of Divine Mercy devotees and promoters, among whom are cardinals, bishops, priests, religious and the laity.

It is also an offshoot of the World Congress on Mercy, initiated by the Vatican and first convened in Rome in 2008. Subsequently, continental congresses were held across the globe.

Among the speakers of the five-day event is Lithuanian Archbishop Gintaras Grušas of Vilnius, the city where Polish nun St. Faustina Kowalska experienced many of the visions of Jesus that she recorded in her diary.

The city houses the only Divine Mercy image seen by St. Faustina before her death in 1938 at age 33.

Fr. Patrice Chocholski, Rector of the Shrine of Saint Jean Marie Vianney in Ars, France and a well-known lecturer and theologian on the Divine Mercy message, is also set to deliver a talk.

The last AACOM was held in the Malaysian state of Penang in 2018. Its fifth congress was originally scheduled to take place in Hong Kong in 2021, but it was disrupted by the pandemic.

Alfon said registration for the October congress will open on March 19, the feast of St. Joseph, and end on September 8, the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

More updates about the 5th AACOM will be posted on its official Facebook page.

In January 2017, the Philippines also hosted the 4th World Apostolic Congress on Mercy. **(CBCP News)**

Mining / A1

"We demand a moratorium to halt the ongoing damage and hold a national conversation. Is profit more important than people's lives? Is the short-term gain worth sacrificing future generations?" he said.

Caritas Philippines said it stands with the people of Mindanao, urging swift action from the government, mining companies, and all stakeholders.

"The moratorium is just the first step—we must rise above self-interest and choose a path that heals our land and empowers our people," Labiao said.

In 2021, the national government lifted a nine-year moratorium on new mineral agreements to increase revenues, a decision that dismayed Caritas Philippines and many other environmental advocates.

Then-president Rodrigo Duterte's executive order reopened the door for new mining agreements and reviews of existing contracts for potential renegotiation.

Duterte also signed into law the Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion (Train) bill, doubling the excise tax rate from 2% to 4% on minerals, mineral products, and quarry resources.

David / A1

Asian Bishops' Conferences.

Bishop Pablo Virgilio David of Kalookan was elected to the second-highest post of the FABC during the central committee meeting in Bangkok on Feb. 22.

David will work alongside Indian Cardinal Filipe Neri Ferrão of Goa, who was elected as the next FABC president.

Ferrão and David will succeed Cardinal Charles Maung Bo of Yangon

and Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith of Colombo as president and vice president, respectively.

Archbishop Tarcisius Isao Kikuchi of Tokyo, meanwhile, was reelected as Secretary General for a second term.

The term of office for the three FABC officials will begin in January 2025.

FABC brings together 19 bishops' conferences of Asia as full members

and 8 associate members.

Approved by the Holy See, it unites Asian episcopal conferences to promote solidarity and co-responsibility for the welfare of the Church and society in Asia.

The Central Secretariat, based in Bangkok, is the principal service agency of the FABC and serves as an instrument of coordination both within the FABC and with outside offices and agencies. **(CBCP News)**

Cebu / A1

to Boljoon at the pulpit where they were surreptitiously removed," Palma said in a statement released Feb. 20.

The panels depicting the founder of the Augustinian Order resurfaced at the NMP on Feb. 13, described as "a gift to the nation" from private collectors Edwin and Aileen Bautista.

"The panels, which feature the image of Saint Augustine of Hippo, trace its original provenance from the pulpit of the Patrocinio de Maria Santisima Parish Church in Boljoon, Cebu," the museum said in a social media post on Feb. 14.

"The National Museum of

the Philippines thanks Mr. and Mrs. Bautista for their generous contribution to our ever-growing national collection," it said.

In another statement issued Feb. 19, the NMP claimed that the donors procured the panels through "legitimate means, highlighting their commitment to ethical acquisition."

"The donors' decision to acquire these artifacts and donate to the Philippines reflects their dedication to preserving cultural heritage and promoting patriotism," it added.

But the archbishop said that the archdiocese has no record of any

request requesting approval "to deconsecrate them for removal."

He added that such approval wouldn't have been granted, considering the panels' sacred status as objects where Augustinian friars preached to the faithful for centuries.

"We have to assert the sacral nature of these panels," Palma said. "Their illegal removal constitutes a sacrilege."

"They should never have been treated, then or now, as mere artworks for exhibition in museums, much less for private appreciation by the collectors who purchased them," he said. **(CBCP News)**

Currents / A5

in the awakening or formation of a national consciousness. Jose Rizal would admit so in his dedication of his *El Filibusterismo* to the three martyred priests. The Katipuneros would make the acronym of their names the password of the KKK as a show of respect to the priests. GOMBURZA would then be the perfect story to defend and celebrate the important role of the Church in the life and history of the country. Its message of courage and nationalism would also be a shot in the arm for the populace who were now weary and tired of the political malaise that had befallen the country.

But the road to the finished line was once again paved with risks and dangers, most primarily in the area of funding. There was also the Covid pandemic which delayed the

completion of the film. But again, with only our faith in the cause we were fighting for, we soldiered on. And the gods as it were smiled at our brave efforts and brought us luck. The film was selected as an entry in the largest film festival in the country. It would end up the most awarded film in the festival. But more importantly, it would inspire reflections and conversations about nationalism, history, etc., on social media, inside classrooms and parishes, and even within the public or political sector. Buoyed by the accolades and praises, one media pundit wrote that there could be a renaissance in our film industry as evidenced by GOMBURZA.

But I remember a discussion with a media mogul before; he was so impressed with and inspired by the

movie HENERAL LUNA, but admitted he could not produce such historical films because "walang pera diyán." He would rather produce the formulaic ones (e.g., rom-com, horror) which have actually dumbed down the masses, like the so-called "bomba" films of the 70s which Marcos used to distract the populace from his abuses. Indeed, the phenomenal HENERAL LUNA was produced by a group of independent film makers and producers who faced the risk of losing money. No. No renaissance is in the offing for the Filipino film industry. For at this point, it is still all about business and profit. And doing quality and relevant films such as historical movies or biopics of our heroes remains too risky for film producers. It is a heroic act in itself.

Caritas PH brings 'bamboo forest' project to Panay, Negros



The agreement was signed at the Archbishop's Residence compound in Roxas City on Feb. 28, 2024. CASAC

By LEONOR ROSALES

PANAY and Negros Islands will be host to about 200,000 bamboo plants as part of a church-based climate mitigation project.

A memorandum of agreement was signed on Feb. 28 in Roxas City for the "Caritas Bamboo Forest Project," fostering collaboration between Caritas Philippines and the archdioceses of Capiz and Jaro, as well as the Diocese of San Carlos.

The project, covering a total land area of 32.9 hectares, will be located in the cities of Cadiz and San Carlos, both in Negros Occidental, as well as in the towns of Anilao in Iloilo and Cuartero in Capiz.

Bishop Gerardo Alminaza of San Carlos said the project is their contribution to the Church's global Laudato Si Action for biodiversity conservation and climate change mitigation.

"It is the Church's response to the climate emergency. It is not just climate change but rather a climate emergency," said Alminaza, who is also the vice

president of Caritas Philippines, said at a press conference.

Fr. Mark Granflor, Social Action Director of the Archdiocese of Capiz, said that caring for God's creation is one of the most fundamental things that people are called to do.

"We are gathered here for this extraordinary event to remind ourselves of the beauty of God's gifts... to be more appreciative and responsible to God's creation," Granflor said.

The MoU signing ceremony was held at the residence of Archbishop Victor Bendico of Capiz.

Aside from Alminaza and Bendico, those present included Bishop Jose Colin Bagaforo and Fr. Antonio Labiao, Caritas Philippines president and executive secretary, respectively, as well as other local partners.

Studies show that bamboos are effective in reducing carbon footprint and contributing to the fight against climate change.

Launched in 2022, the Caritas Bamboo Forest Project aims to plant at least five million bamboo poles in five years in all the country's dioceses.

Holiness / A1



Friar Robert Lezohupski, OFM Conv, a judge in the Vatican's Ecclesiastical Tribunal, speaks during the 30th Canon Law Society of the Philippines (CLSP) National Convention in Dipolog City on Feb. 28, 2024. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

He also exhorted the canon lawyers and canonists present to become witnesses of the mercy of God.

"In spite of our failures, we choose to continue to love," Caermare said

Among the speakers at the three-day event was Fr. Danilo Flores from the Diocese of Rome, also serving as the Judicial Vicar of the Diocese of Paranaque, who addressed specific canonical updates, notably the Franciscan (Pope Francis) Reforms.

Keynote speaker Friar Robert Lezohupski, OFM Conv, a judge at the Ecclesiastical Tribunal of Vatican City, addressed the topics of the "notion of the internal forum" and the "sacrament of penance as an apostolate of mercy."

Lezohupski, also a canon law professor at the Pontifical Urban University in Rome, began his lecture by expressing gratitude to priests for their dedication in the confessional.

He emphasized the indispensable nature of the sacrament, stating, "The role of

the Church is not to cast people out but to bring them (back) into the Church."

According to him, "Justice without pastoral love is revenge. Justice without love is a lie."

During his lecture on the Internal Forum, he urged the attending priests to avoid spiritual abuse and the conflation of the internal and external forums.

"Ignorance breeds spiritual abuse," he emphasized, reminding participants that betraying the seal of confession is tantamount to betraying Christ.

Msgr. Raul Go, CLSP president, said that the topic on the internal forum was chosen because nobody among the Canon Lawyers in the country have been trained on it.

Fr. Flores had been Fr. Lezohupski's student in Rome.

Six principal and four associate members of CLSP were also sworn in during the convention participated by 110 priests, 5 religious and 16 lay.

The Diocese of Cubao will host the 31st CLSP Convention next year.

Pope Francis honors Our Lady of Antipolo with 'golden rose'



The Antipolo International Shrine receives a golden rose from Pope Francis to honor Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage. DIOCESE OF ANTIPOLO

By ROY LAGARDE

A VATICAN official presented a 'golden rose' from Pope Francis to Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage, calling it a reminder for pilgrims of "the life of faith, hope, and charity."

Italian Archbishop Rino Fisichella brought the papal gift and presided over the Mass at the Antipolo Cathedral on Feb. 26 to celebrate its recent declaration as an international shrine.

"May this golden rose remain as an enduring sign for future generations," said Fisichella, the Pro-Prefect of the Dicastery for Evangelization's Section for Evangelization, in his homily.

The golden rose, according to Vatican News, has ancient roots, symbolizing the papal

blessing. The tradition of this gift dates back to the Middle Ages.

Over the centuries, it's been given to monasteries, shrines, sovereigns, and prominent figures, recognizing their commitment to faith and the common good.

Since his election to the papacy, Pope Francis has already presented several golden roses to Marian shrines, including Aparecida in Brazil in 2017 and Fatima in Portugal the same year.

In his homily, Fisichella said that being an international shrine is not just a privilege "but a mission that must be shared."

"The presence of such a shrine is a sign of grace that calls all of us to a deep witness of faith," he said.

The archbishop also said that the grace experienced by pilgrims to the shrine "needs to be communicated and passed on to others."

"This international shrine... therefore open to the mission of having no boundaries, but instead, opening wide its doors to welcome all, especially the poor and those in need of consolation and peace," he said.

Fisichella also took the opportunity to request prayers for peace, especially in places "where people suffer unjustly because of the dominance of the violence of war."

"To all of us falls the responsibility not only to be heralds of Christian hope, but above all, builders of hope, creating concrete signs that give credibility to our worlds," he said.

New Caceres archbishop named, to assume post in May

POPE Francis on Feb. 22 appointed Bishop Rex Andrew Alarcon as the new archbishop of Caceres.

Alarcon, currently serving as the bishop of Daet, will succeed Archbishop Rolando Tria Tirona, who retired at the age of 77.

Tirona has led the archdiocese since November 2012.

As archbishop of Caceres, Alarcon will oversee the pastoral care of Catholics in Naga City, considered the economic, cultural, educational, and religious center of the Bicol region.



Archbishop-elect Rex Andrew Alarcon of Caceres. NIKKO BALBEDINA/CBCP NEWS

'Mixed feelings'

Celebrating his first public Mass after his appointment, Alarcon said he has mixed emotions as prepares to take over a much larger ecclesiastical territory.

"Not our will, but the will of the Lord," he said in his homily at the Daet Cathedral on Feb. 25. "But it's a mixed feeling of gratitude and sadness that I receive such an appointment."

As the shepherd of Daet for only around four years, the archbishop-elect admitted that he feels he has yet to fully serve his ministry in the diocese.

When he took over the diocese in 2019, Alarcon said he thought it was going to be an assignment "for life."

"I did not expect this because we really don't aspire for such a position," he further said in his homily.

On Aug. 31, 2024, the diocese will celebrate its 50th foundation anniversary.

The bishop said it saddens him that he will leave the diocese soon, just ahead of its golden jubilee celebration. "But we pray to the Lord,"

he said. "Certainly, the Lord does not deceive us... His love is such that He can't do anything against us. He cannot but love us," he added.

Installation

Alarcon will officially assume his new role on May 2.

His installation will be held at the Naga Metropolitan Cathedral at 9 a.m.

Alarcon was born in Daet, the provincial capital of Camarines Norte, on August 6, 1970.

After completing his high school education and philosophy courses at the Holy Rosary Minor Seminary in Naga, he studied theology at the University of Santo Tomas (UST) Central Seminary in Manila.

He was ordained a priest for the Caceres archdiocese on November 9, 1996.

The 53-year-old also holds a licentiate in Church history, which he obtained from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome in 2001.

Before becoming a bishop, he led the Bicol Association of Catholic Schools and served as the president of

the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP).

On Jan. 2, 2019, the pope appointed him as the bishop of Daet. He was ordained to the episcopate on March 19 of the same year and formally assumed his new role the following day.

As metropolitan archbishop, he also meets with the suffragan bishops to discuss matters of importance to the region. The suffragan dioceses of the Caceres archdiocese include Daet, Legazpi, Libmanan, Masbate, Sorsogon and Virac.

Caceres is one of the oldest dioceses in the Philippines. It is also the center of devotion to Our Lady of Peñafrancia, which is one of the largest Marian devotions in Asia.

The archdiocese also directly supervises 93 parishes, with a total Catholic population of approximately 1.5 million as of 2017.

Within the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), Alarcon currently serves as the chairman of the Episcopal Commission on Youth. (CBCP News)

Philippines' oldest bishop turns 94

By RANDOLPH LAGRAMA
Contributor

ARCHBISHOP Emeritus Pedro Dean of Palo, the oldest Filipino bishop, celebrated his 94th birthday in Leyte province on Wednesday, Feb. 21.

Archbishop Dean, born on Feb. 21, 1930, in Calbayog City in Samar province, is one of the last Filipino bishops appointed by Pope Paul VI, who is now a saint.

For more than six decades, he celebrated "thousands of Masses throughout his ministry: 67 years as priest and 46 years in the episcopate.

His birthday was marked with a Mass, which he presided over at the St. John the Evangelist School of Theology (SJEST), the theological institution he founded 35 years ago in Palo town.

"Today, I have completed 94 years of age, and tomorrow I will be starting my 95th year, which I doubt if I can complete due to advanced age and poor health," Dean said in his homily.

The liturgy was concelebrated by Archbishop John Du of Palo, Bishop Oscar Florencio of the Military Ordinariate, and Bishop Rex Ramirez of Naval.

Florencio was the former Rector of SJEST, while Ramirez was a former formator.

The celebration coincided with the 23rd Alumni Homecoming of the seminary. It has been a tradition of the seminary to celebrate the alumni homecoming on the days that coincide with the founder's birthday.

Priesthood is grace

In his homily, the archbishop stressed that the priesthood is not a profession but a grace, describing it as the second greatest sacrament after the Holy Eucharist.

He even emphasized the inseparability of the two



Archbishop Emeritus Pedro Dean of Palo delivers his homily during Mass for his 94th birthday at the St. John the Evangelist School of Theology (SJEST) in Palo, Leyte on Feb. 21, 2024.

sacraments, saying, "They are twin Sacraments and more than just twins, because there can be no Eucharist without the priesthood, nor there can be a priesthood without the Eucharist."

Archbishop Dean continued by reminding the priests to celebrate the Mass with the greatest reverence and devotion.

"For a priest to say Mass carelessly or in a state of sin is to misrepresent the real priest celebrating the Mass," he said.

He invited everyone to pay attention to the very captivating phrase in the words of consecration: "Do this in memory of me."

In this phrase, according to him, "He is asking us not necessarily to repeat or follow the ritual, the action or the rubric of consecration. His phrase means to do what I did, sacrifice yourselves, shed blood for the forgiveness of sins... etc... In other words, you share my priesthood, then share my victimhood, my sacrifice."

'Please help me become a priest'

Towards the end of his homily, the archbishop also shared the secret he had carried since his days as a young seminarian.

According to him, he was sickly and frail. However,

afraid to seek advice from his seminary formators about leaving the seminary due to health issues, he pretended that he was not suffering.

He prayed to the Lord, especially to the Blessed Mother, "Please help me become a priest someday."

Archbishop Dean also said he pleaded with God, even just for a day of priesthood, so that he would be given the grace to celebrate Mass, even just once, and he would be ready to die.

Ordained priest in 1956, he worked for two decades as secretary to the late Cardinal Julio Rosales of Cebu, his uncle.

In December 1977, Pope Paul VI, who is now a saint, appointed him as auxiliary bishop of Davao. He was ordained bishop on Jan. 25, 1978.

In July 1980, pope-turned-saint John Paul II appointed him as bishop of Taguig, a post he served until he became the archbishop of Palo in 1985.

Archbishop Dean shepherded the archdiocese for nearly 21 years, marking the longest incumbency of a bishop in the Palo archdiocese's history.

During his active ministry, he also served as chairman of the Episcopal Commission on Doctrine of the Faith of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP).

Pope Francis appoints CamSur priest as new Virac bishop



Bishop-elect Luisito Occiano of Virac.

POPE Francis on March 1 named Father Luisito Occiano of the Archdiocese of Caceres as the new bishop of Virac.

Occiano will replace Bishop Manolo de los Santos, whose resignation was accepted by the pope on the same day.

De los Santos, who is now 76 years old, served the island diocese in Catanduanes province since 1994.

Occiano, 52, currently serves as the rector and parish priest of the Archdiocesan Shrine and Parish of St. Joseph in Camarines Sur province's San Jose town.

He is also the director of the Caceres Commission on Communication.

Occiano asked for prayers and support as he prepares to serve in his new role.

He specifically asked the faithful to pray for him to receive the wisdom necessary to serve them.

"Please pray for me as I strive to fulfill this sacred calling entrusted to me by the Church," Occiano said.

"May the Holy Spirit guide me in shepherding God's people with wisdom, compassion, and integrity," he added.

During his installation as shrine rector in 2021, now Archbishop Emeritus Rolando Tria Tirona of Caceres described Occiano as a "humble, approachable priest with a warm personality."

"He relates well with the people and works effectively with them," Tirona said. "And he is very committed to his work."

The archbishop also said that there was a time when he wanted the priest to

study diplomacy at the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy in Rome "because he can be a diplomat."

"He has the charisma for it," Tirona said, adding that the priest is also active in various civic organizations.

Born on June 21, 1971, Occiano completed his philosophy and theology studies at the Holy Rosary Major Seminary in Naga City. He was ordained priest on November 10, 1996.

Following his ordination, he pursued further studies in religious formation and catechesis at the Ateneo De Manila University. He also holds the Master of Arts degree from the Ateneo de Naga University.

As a young priest, he served as a parochial vicar at the Naga Metropolitan Cathedral before later becoming the secretary to the then shepherd of Caceres, the late Archbishop Leonardo Legaspi.

He also served as the director of the archdiocese's catechetical ministry and as vice rector of the Minor Basilica of Our Lady of Peñafrancia.

In 2003, he became the parochial vicar of the Parish of St. Francis of Assisi in Naga City.

From 2015 to 2021, he served his first assignment as parish priest at St. Bartholomew Parish in Baa, Camarines Sur. (CBCP News)



Pope Francis presides over Mass in the Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome on Feb. 14, 2024. VATICAN MEDIA

‘We are ashes loved by God’

Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis during the Mass on Ash Wednesday,
14 February 2024, Basilica of Santa Sabina

WHEN you give alms, or pray or fast, take care to do these things *in secret*, for your Father sees in secret (cf. *Mt 6:4*). “Go to your room”: this is the invitation that Jesus addresses to each of us at the beginning of the Lenten journey.

Going to your room means returning to the *heart*, as the prophet Joel admonishes (cf. *Joel 2:12*). It means journeying from without to within, so that our whole life, including our relationship with God, is not reduced to mere outward show, a frame without a picture, a draping of the soul, but is born from within and reflects the movements of our heart, our deepest desires, our thoughts, our feelings, the very core of our person.

Lent, then, immerses us in a bath of purification and of self-spoliation: it helps us to remove all the cosmetics that we use in order to appear presentable, better than we really are. To return to the heart means to go back to our true self and to present it just as it is, naked and defenseless, in the sight of God. It means looking within ourselves and acknowledging our real identity, removing the masks we so often wear, slowing the frantic pace of our lives and embracing life and the truth of who we are. Life is not a play; Lent invites us to come down from the stage and return to the heart, to the reality of who we are: a return to the heart and the truth.

That is why this evening, in a spirit of prayer and humility, we receive ashes on our head. This gesture is meant to remind us of the ultimate reality of our lives: that we are dust and our life passes away like a breath (cf. *Ps 39:6; 144:4*). Yet the Lord—he and he alone—does not allow it to vanish; he gathers

and shapes the dust that we are, lest it be swept away by the winds of life or sink into the abyss of death.

The ashes placed on our head invite us to rediscover the secret of life. They tell us that as long as we continue to shield our hearts and hide ourselves behind a mask, to appear invincible, we will be empty and arid within. When, on the other hand, we have the courage to bow our heads in order to look within, we will discover the presence of God who loves us and has always loved us. At last those shields you have built for yourself will be shattered and you will be able to feel yourself loved with an eternal love.

Sister, brother, I, you, each of us, is loved with an eternal love. We are ashes on which God has breathed his breath of life, we are the earth which he has shaped with his own hands (cf. *Gen 2:7; Ps 119:73*), dust from which we will rise for a life without end prepared for us from all eternity (cf. *Is 26:9*). And if, in the ashes that we are, the fire of the love of God burns, then we will discover that we have indeed been shaped by that love and called to love others in turn. To love the brothers and sisters all around us, to be considerate to others, to feel compassion, to show mercy, to share all that we are and all that we have with those in need. Almsgiving, prayer and fasting are not mere external practices; they are paths that lead to the heart, to the core of the Christian life. They make us realize that we are ashes loved by God, and they enable us to spread that love on the “ashes” of so many situations in our daily lives, so that in them hope, trust and joy may be reborn.

Saint Anselm of Aosta has left us these words of encouragement that this evening we can make our own: “Escape from your everyday business for a short while, hide for a moment from your restless thoughts. Break off from your cares and troubles and be less concerned about your tasks and labours. Make a little time for God and rest a while in him. Enter into your mind’s inner chamber. Shut out everything but God and whatever helps you to seek him; and when you have shut the door, look for him. Speak now to God and say with your whole heart: I seek your face; your face, O Lord, I desire” (*Proslogion*, 1).

Let us listen then, throughout this Lent, to the voice of the Lord who does not tire of repeating: *go to your room*, return to your heart. It is a salutary invitation for us, who so often live on the surface of things, who are so concerned to be noticed, who constantly need to be admired and appreciated. Without realizing it, we find ourselves no longer having an “inner chamber” in which we can stop and care for ourselves, immersed as we are in a world in which everything, including our emotions and deepest feelings, has to become “social” – but how can something be “social” that does not come from the *heart*? Even the most tragic and painful experiences risk not having a quiet place where they can be kept. Everything has to be exposed, shown off, fed to the gossip-mill of the moment. But the Lord says to us: *Enter into the secret*, return to the centre of yourself. Precisely there, where so many fears, feelings of guilt and sin are lurking, precisely there the Lord has descended in order to heal and cleanse you. Let us enter

into our inner chamber: there the Lord dwells, there our frailty is accepted and we are loved unconditionally.

Let us return, brothers and sisters. Let us return to God with all our heart. During these weeks of Lent, let us make space for the prayer of silent adoration, in which we experience the presence of the Lord, like Moses, like Elijah, like Mary, like Jesus. Have we noticed that we have lost the sense of worship? Let us return to worship. Let us lend the ear of our hearts to the One who, in silence, wants to say to us: “I am your God – the God of mercy and compassion, the God of pardon and love, the God of tenderness and care... Do not judge yourself. Do not condemn yourself. Do not reject yourself. Let my love touch the deepest, most hidden corners of your heart and reveal to you your own beauty, a beauty that you have lost sight of, but will become visible to you again in the light of my mercy.” The Lord is calling us: “Come, let me wipe your tears, and let my mouth come close to your ear and say to you: I love you, I love you, I love you” (H. NOUWEN, *The Road to Daybreak*, New York, 1988, 157-158). Do we believe that the Lord loves us, that the Lord loves *me*?

Brothers and sisters, let us not be afraid to strip ourselves of worldly trappings and return to the heart, returning to what is essential. Let us think of Saint Francis, who after stripping himself embraced with his entire being the Father in heaven. Let us acknowledge what we are: dust loved by God, called to be dust in love with God. Thanks to him, we will be reborn from the ashes of sin to new life in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit.

(First of two parts)

Towards a Personal Prelature for OFWs

Questions and objections to a novel idea for overseas Filipinos

By FR. JAIME B. ACHACOSO, J.C.D.



Fr. Agustin Opalalic, a Filipino priest serving in the U.S. Diocese of San Diego, speaks to the Philippine bishops about the necessity of the personal prelature for Filipino migrants during the CBCP's 124th plenary assembly in Tagaytay City on July 7, 2022. He first introduced the pastoral need to the Permanent Council during its meeting in January 2020. ROY LAGARDE

IN the recently concluded Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines last month, a motion to petition the Holy See to erect a Personal Prelature for OFWs was overwhelmingly approved with 70 votes for and 9 votes either against or undecided. While this was a cause of joy for those of us who have been advocating for this for a long time, we also realize that we still need to do a lot of explaining in order to dispel possible objections and misunderstandings as regards this novel proposal, which even in the international Catholic scene has caused quite a stir among those in the know. In the first part of this article, we shall tackle the more serious misconceptions and objections and try to give as concise an answer in every case. In the second and concluding part, we shall tackle the most common reasons why this move had been kept in the backburner for more than a decade.

1. Is it really necessary to erect a Personal Circumscription or a special jurisdiction for OFWs? Aren't the territorial jurisdictions (dioceses and parishes) in the places where there are appreciable numbers of OFWs already taking adequate pastoral care of them?

This question had been asked and studied both in the academe and in the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines since the 1990s. At the outset, a distinction had been made between the almost two million stably migrated or settled overseas Filipinos and the eight million contract workers who are deployed in an unstable manner—both in time (with 2-year renewable contracts for the most part) and in space (since they go where available contract employment is).

For the former—who are veritable migrants—there indeed is very little need for a specific personal jurisdiction, since for the most part they should be (and happily are in most cases) incorporated to the local churches. It is the latter eight million OFWs, temporarily taken away from their country and their families to work and send home hard-earned dollars, who are in dire need of a specific personal circumscription to provide a peculiar pastoral care for them.

The great majority of the OFWs

are in areas of meager territorial ecclesiastical circumscriptions. This is the case, for example, in the Middle East and in most of Asia, where there are millions of OFWs and very few dioceses and too few diocesan clergy to provide adequate pastoral care. This problem is compounded by the special needs of such OFWs—similar to the peculiar needs of other contract workers of other nationalities who are confronted by special challenges: (1) the language and cultural barriers that exist, especially among those coming from less educated and humbler backgrounds, who comprise the preponderant majority of such workers; (2) the spiritual/ascetical problems provoked by the loneliness of being away from their homes and families; (3) the allure of other religions and the aggressive proselytizing of Christian groups.

Thus, in the Middle East for example, there are many cases of OFWs embracing Islam, among other things due to a perceived economic advantage in doing so. But even in Europe, there are notable cases of OFWs falling victim to spurious Catholic groups, just because the diocesan authorities were not aware of what was happening amongst the Filipinos, due to the language and cultural barriers.

In sum, the operative word is *adequate* pastoral care. There just is no way for the local clergy and territorial jurisdictions to adequately deliver the means of salvation—the Word of God (catechesis), the Sacraments and the spiritual leadership—to the overwhelming numbers of OFWs in their midst, in some cases many times more than their local communities. In Qatar, for example, there are around 236,000 OFWs and only one Catholic parish. Furthermore—as the Holy Father had pointed out—the OFWs can be agents of the new evangelization if they were only provided the peculiar pastoral care demanded by their peculiar circumstances and missionary opportunities.

The recent *motu proprio* of Pope Francis (of 8.VIII.2023), modifying canons 295-296 of the Code of Canon Law regarding personal prelatitudes, catalyzed a renewed attention to this long-standing problem and eventually resulted in the CBCP overwhelmingly approving a petition to the Holy

See to erect a Personal Prelature for OFWs.

2. In the cases where inadequate pastoral care for OFWs is verified, is a Personal Circumscription the correct remedy? Could such a need not be addressed through other more familiar institutions for the adequate distribution of priests, like a clerical association of Catholic faithful?

In fact, for the past 50 years since the exportation of Filipino labor became a policy of the Philippine Government, the Filipino bishops had been trying to address the spiritual needs of the growing numbers of OFWs through such institutions, even putting such evangelizing efforts under the coordination of a specific *Episcopal Commission on Migrants and Itinerant People* in the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines. The work done by such institutions—especially by contributing chaplains—cannot be disregarded. Nevertheless, given the number of OFWs, such chaplaincies barely scratch the surface. Even more than the problem of numbers is the problem of coordination and pastoral thrust. In effect, with such chaplains coming from different territorial circumscriptions and spiritualities, with no jurisdictional bonds to the coordinating commission of the CBCP and many times not even to the local territorial jurisdictions where they are working, a veritable situation of acephalous priests arise, to the detriment not only of the itinerant flock of OFWs, but also—and even more importantly—of the itinerant priests themselves.

The advantage of a personal circumscription with jurisdictional bonds uniting the clergy to the prelate—and not just bonds of goodwill—is that it assures a unity of pastoral trust and spirit so as to take care firstly of the clerics themselves and—as a fruit of that—of the itinerant flock itself.

It is for this reason that as early as 2008, the Canon Law Society of the Philippines, as a result of an in-depth study that became the theme of the society's national convention that year, passed a resolution asking the CBCP to petition the Holy See to erect a Personal Prelature for OFWs. Such an initiative eventually caught traction but with other seemingly more pressing matters, it has been

relegated to the backburner for well over a decade.

3. Even if a Personal Circumscription were the solution, does it have to be a Personal Prelature? Why not an ordinariate (like for the military and their dependents), or an apostolic vicariate (like the military vicariates of old) or even a personal diocese?

No less than two doctoral theses in canon law—by Msgr. Agustin Opalalic at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross (Rome) and by Msgr. Edgar Formoso at the Pontifical University of Santo Tomas (Manila)—and various other monographic works have been dedicated to this question over the past three decades. The aforementioned jurisdictional circumscriptions are phenomena of exclusive jurisdiction with respect to the territorial circumscription within which they operate, thus tending to form encysted communities of faithful within the particular or local churches where they operate.

Thus, the military ordinariates operate independently from the dioceses in which the military personnel and their dependents find themselves. The same thing happens with a personal diocese, such that such circumscriptions constitute veritable particular churches, other than the dioceses in which they function. In contrast, the overarching aim of the Personal Prelature for OFWs would be to facilitate the incorporation of the Filipinos to the territorial circumscription (e.g., the parish or the diocese) where they are. This is done through an essential characteristic of the Personal Prelature, which is known as cumulative jurisdiction—i.e., it provides an overlay of extraordinary (peculiar) pastoral care *in addition to but never supplanting* the ordinary pastoral care provided by the territorial circumscription and *always in line with the directives of the local ordinary*. This is best appreciated by recognizing that three situations exist for overseas Filipinos:

1st stably migrated Filipinos, in areas where a well-developed territorial ecclesiastical circumscription exists (e.g., U.S., Canada, U.K., Australia, Italy, Spain). In such places, a Personal Prelature for OFWs would play a

very complementary role at the service of the dioceses, geared towards the incorporation of the Filipinos in their local parishes.

2nd OFWs who are temporarily working in areas where a well-developed territorial ecclesiastical circumscription exists (e.g., most of Europe). In such cases, the role of the Personal Prelature would be more important, since the OFWs may not find it easy to be incorporated to the local community, due to the language and cultural barriers, coupled with the short time that they are there. In such situations, the chaplains of the Personal Prelature for OFWs would play a more incisive role not only of cushioning the language and cultural shock and providing the ordinary pastoral care that the OFWs otherwise may not receive in the local parishes, but also of providing the extraordinary pastoral care demanded by their special condition of being veritable aliens away from their country and families. The specific problems brought about by loneliness will be addressed with more intensive accompaniment. Marital and extramarital infidelity and even apostasy would be avoided.

3rd OFWs in areas of less developed or even non-existent territorial ecclesiastical circumscription (e.g., the Middle East and most of Asia). In such places, the Personal Prelature for OFWs would really play a substantial and crucial role of even supplying the ordinary pastoral care that the dioceses might be hard-pressed to provide.

4. Why not just tweak the figure of the Ordinariate or a Clerical Institute to what is being proposed as a Personal Prelature for OFWs, rather than resort to such a novel structure?

The answer is canonical economy or simple canonical sense. Why tweak the already non-canonical (in the sense of not in the Code of Canon Law) figure of the Ordinariate to adopt to the reality of what is needed for the extraordinary pastoral care of OFWs, when the canonical figure of the Personal Prelature—as outlined in cc.294-297 of the CIC—lends itself perfectly to what is needed? In effect, the Personal Prelature is the paradigm of a cumulative jurisdiction—i.e., for the provision of an extraordinary pastoral care to a group of faithful with a peculiar need due to a personal condition (in this case of being temporarily outside of their particular churches in the Philippines), without being abstracted or exempted from the territorial jurisdiction of the particular churches in which they may be located at the moment.

It was envisioned by Vatican II and codified in the 1983 Code of Canon Law; it is not as novel as one may think. More importantly, the Personal Prelature provides a perfect fit for the care of OFWs. There is nothing to re-invent or modify, because the four canons outlining the figure of the Personal Prelature are of sufficient flexibility to be tailored to the peculiar needs of the OFWs. Other alternatives are not better options but would rather be forced. At the very least, those who object to the Personal Prelature might be hard-pressed to demonstrate that it is a bad option.

Finally, the proposal itself to ask the Holy See to erect a Personal Prelature for Filipino Migrants is not new either. It had been discussed at CBCP Plenary Assemblies and Permanent Councils, Canon Law Society of the Philippines conventions since 2008 and had been the subject of doctoral theses and journal articles since 30 years ago. *(To be concluded.)*

‘We need to engage in more listening and dialogue’

Homily of Manila Archbishop, Jose F. Cardinal Advincula, during the Walk for Life at the University of Santo Tomas on February 17, 2024

TOGETHER, we walk for life.

This is the theme we have chosen for our Walk for Life 2024. We want to highlight the fact that in life, we cannot walk alone. As we uphold, promote, and defend the sacredness of life and the dignity of every person, we cannot be alone. We need one another. We need to journey together. An African proverb tells us, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” Indeed, our defense and promotion of a culture of life in our society today is not a short-term engagement or a temporary battle. From experience, we know that as long as there are subtle and not so subtle attacks against the family and human life, we will be there to register our firm objection and make sure that our united stand is heard.

Today, I would like to honor and appreciate all of you who have been at the forefront of our mission to proclaim the Gospel of Life, a message lovingly received day after day by the Church and preached with dauntless fidelity as good news to the people of every age and culture. For some of you,

this has been your life-long task and advocacy. Thanks to all of you, missionaries for the Gospel of Life, we can fulfill our prophetic role in a rapidly changing world that is oftentimes more welcoming to a civilization of death and so hostile to a civilization of life and love. I encourage you to continue to be passionate in your ministry. Do not be disheartened if sometimes you feel that what you have been doing is not even noticed or ends up in an apparent failure. Take courage. You are not alone. As the prophet Isaiah said in the first reading, “The Lord will guide you always and give you plenty even on the parched land. He will renew your strength, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring whose water never fails.”

The theme “Together, we walk for life,” is also a challenge for us to explore new pathways to respond better to the dominant values of our contemporary times. Kailangan na rin nating harapin ang katotohanan na napakaraming isyu sa pamilya at lipunan ngayon ang hindi na maaaring sagutin ng “Huwag ka nang magtanong. Sumunod ka nang lang.” We need to engage in more



Cardinal Jose Advincula presides over Mass for the “Walk for Life” at the University of Santo Tomas Open Grounds in Manila, Feb. 17, 2024. ROY LAGARDE

listening and dialogue. This is part of walking for life. Yes, we are clear about our teachings on the different issues connected with life and family. But we also need to rethink our approaches, methodologies, and strategies. How do we deal with the dilemmas and complexities of modern families, the irregular situations in the home, the diversity in understanding identity and personhood, the wounds caused and inflicted because of polarization even in the home? Pope Francis has pointed us to the style of synodality so we can listen and discern together. It is important that all of us here in this walk must help each other to become a synodal Church in mission.

Jesus, in our Gospel today from St. Luke, gave us the best example of how to walk for life together.

He dined and dialogued with the known sinners of His time. He called Levi, a tax collector, to follow Him. He attended the banquet which Levi prepared in his house. He had no problem being on the same table with a large crowd of tax collectors! He told the scribes and pharisees who were complaining about his impertinent behavior, “Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do.”

I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners.” We must have the same boldness and audacity of Jesus. If we want to walk together for life, we must learn to be all things to all as St. Paul would say in his letter to the Corinthians.

Yes, our society today needs teachers that can lead others to the right path and to the right choices.

We must not abandon this mission of being teachers and catechists of the Gospel of Life. But we must also seriously consider what St. Paul VI said, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.” Families today, including and especially the young people, need accompaniment in their journey. They don’t need more judgments and condemnations. To lead people to the truth, we must do so in love. Truth in charity. Walking together for life. This is where the Holy Spirit is leading us today. May we become active proclaimers of the Gospel of life together. Mabuhay ang pamilyang Pilipino! Sama-sama nating ipagtanggol ang buhay! Together, let us walk for life! Amen.

‘Ang pagbabagong-anyo ng bayang Filipino’

Homily of Bishop Pablo David, Bishop of Kalookan and President of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines on the 2nd Sunday of Lent, February 25, 2024, 35th anniversary of EDSA Shrine

NAISIP na ba ninyo, kung hindi naganap ang EDSA PPR, ano na kaya ang nangyari sa ating bayan mula sa araw na iyon ng Feb 25, 1986? Kung walang mga milyong tao na pumaginta sa mga armadong puwersa ng guberno at puwersa ng mga nagrebelde, baka umagos nang husto ang dugo sa EDSA. O kung nanalo man ang mga rebeldeng sundalo, baka military junta ang ibinunga. Baka hindi na nanumbalik ang civilian supremacy over the military. Baka walang katapusang civil war ang kinahinatnan natin, katulad ng sa bansang Myanmar.

Ang ganda ng timing ng pyesta ng EDSA Shrine sa taon na ito ng 2024: second Sunday of Lent, at ang Gospel reading ay ang Transfiguration story ayon kay St Mark. Kaya ang homily na ito ay tungkol sa EDSA People Power Revolution bilang makasaysayang karanasan ng “Pagbabagong Anyo ng Bayang Filipino,” at kung bakit mahalaga na ito’y ating balik-tanawin, sariwain at pagnilayan.

Sa ating first reading, nagtayo daw ng altar si Abraham para pag-alayan ang anak niyang si Isaac, sa paniwalang iyon ang hinihingi ng Diyos. Salamat na lang at pagsubok lang pala, at pinigilan siya ng Diyos sa huling sandali. Di ba’t ang dami pa ring mga bansa sa daigdig na nasa giyera, at ang patuloy na isinasakripisyo nila ay ang buhay ng kanilang mga anak sa mga altar ng karahasan at digmaan? Delikado pala ang mga altar; baka magkamali tayo ng iaalay. Magandang itanong sa sarili: “Ano kaya ang mga sakripisyong inihahandog natin sa Diyos sa mga altar ng bayan sa sandaligan ito ng kasaysayan, na baka hindi naman niya hinihingi sa atin, o baka hindi niya ikinatutuwa?”

Dahil napakatinding karanasan ang pinagdaanan ng ating bayan sa lugar na ito 38 years ago noong a-22 hanggang a-25 ng Pebrero 1986, minabuti ng yumaong Jaime Cardinal Sin na itayo ang dambanang ito bilang Archdiocesan Shrine of our Lady of Peace. Sa araw na ito pagnilayan natin bilang isang bayan kung anong klaseng handog ang kalugod-lugod sa Diyos na dapat ialay sa altar ng Dambanang ito. Sa Bibliya maraming kuwento tungkol sa mga lugar na tinayuan ng dambana o altar bilang paggunita sa mga dakilang sandali sa kanilang

kasaysayan. Halimbawa ay ang kuwento sa Genesis 28 tungkol kay Jacob. Napadpad daw siya sa isang lugar kung saan siya nakatulog at nanaginip. Nakita daw niya sa kanyang panaginip ang isang hagdan na nagdurugtong sa langit at lupa. Sa magkabilang panig daw ng hagdan ay may nakita rin siyang mga anghel na umaakyat at bumababa, at ang Diyos mismo na nasa may paanan ng hagdan, nakatayo sa tabi ni Jacob. Nang magising siya, minarkahan daw niya ang lugar na iyon bilang isang sagradong pook at tinawag niyang BETHEL, isang entrada patungo sa “Bahay ng Diyos.” At nagtayo daw siya doon ng isang dambana.

Sa ebanghelyo, parang ganoon din ang binabalak na gawin ni San Pedro matapos na masaksihan niya at ng dalawang kasama niyang mga alagad ang pagbabagong-anyo ni Hesus. Na magtayo ng dambana o kubol, hindi isa kundi tatlo—isa para para kay Hesus, isa para kay Moises, at isa para kay Elias. Ayon sa awtor, nasabi daw niya ito dahil sa matinding pagkamangha sa nasaksihan, parang nawala sa sarili at nagsasabi-sabi. Kaya natakpan daw sila ng madilim na ulap at sinabihan ng isang tinig, “Ito ang Minamahal kong Anak, makinig kayo sa kanya.”

Sa madaling salita, tumahimik daw muna sila bago magplano ng kung ano-ano. Tulad ng temang napili ninyo “EDSA remembered, renewed and reflected”. Pero imbes na past participle, gawin nating present participle: “EDSA 38: Remembering, Renewing and Reflecting”. Mahalagang balik-tanawin, sariwain at pagnilayan ang mga bagay na naganap sa lugar na ito noong Feb 1986. Tulad ng bukambibig ni Pope Francis na SYNODALITY—matuto tayong makilakbay, luwagan ang espasyo ng tolda. Makinig, makipagkaisang-puso at diwa, makilahok at makimisyon. Upang mangyari ito, kailangang hayaang magpatuloy ang pag-uusap; mapalalim ang pag-uusap na ito, gawing “spiritual conversation”, hayaan natin na ang Espiritung gumabay sa atin noon ay siya pa ring gagabay sa atin ngayon at sa darating pang mga panahon.

Baligtad kasi ang gustong mangyari ni San Pedro, ayon sa kuwento. Kaya siguro siya binara ng Diyos. Sumabat-sabat ba naman siya sa pag-uusap ng



Bishop Pablo Virgilio David, CBCP president, delivers the homily during Mass for the 35th Anniversary of EDSA Shrine, Feb. 25, 2024. SCREENSHOT/EDSA SHRINE VIDEO

tatlo. Di ba’t sa ating kultura, hindi tama ang basta ka na lang sasabat sa pag-uusap ng mga tao, o dadaan sa pagitan nila nang hindi nagpapasintabi? Hindi lang siya sumabat; ipagtatayo daw sila ng tatlong kubol. Tig-iisa sila. Paano nila ipagpapatuloy ang pag-uusap kung bubukod sila sa tatlong magkakahiwalay na kubol? Aba hindi lang pala niya sinasabat ang pag-uusap, gusto niyang putulin at tapusin. (May tawag sa ganito sa panahon natin ngayon: mga “conversation stoppers.” Di ba’t may mga topic na pag ipinasok mo ay pumuputol sa pag-uusap? Sa loob mismo ng Simbahan marami ring mga “conversation stoppers.” Pero minabuti ni Pope Francis na buksang muli ang mga pag-uusap.)

Ano ba ang pinag-uusapan nina Hesus, Moises at Elias? KALAYAAN. At ito rin ang paksa ng EDSA: Ano ang susi ng kalayaan?

Kay Moises ito ay ang matapat na pagsunod ng bayang Israel sa mga batas o kautusan ng Diyos. Pagsunod sa pinakaunang Konstitusyon, kumbaga—ang Sampung Utos ng Diyos.

Kay Elias, ang susi ng kalayaan ay ang konsensya ng tao, isang malinis na kalooban na tapat sa kasunduan. Walang kuwenta ang Kautusan o batas kung hindi ito nakatayo sa pundasyon ng katapatan sa kasunduan.

At kay Hesus, ang susi ay ang kusang-loob na paghahandog ng sarili. Hindi salapi o kayamanan, hindi dugo ng hayop o ng tao kundi pag-ibig na

handang mag-alay ng buhay alang-alang sa minamahal.

Ayon sa kuwento ni San Markos, nag-uusap daw ang tatlo—at sa gitna ng pag-uusap na ito, nakita nilang nagningning at nagbagong-anyo si Hesus. Makapangyarihan ang mga pag-uusap sa liwanag ng Salita ng Diyos; nakapagbabago ng anyo!

Ang EDSA ay isang maningning na sandali ng kadakilaan para sa bayang matagal na nanahimik ngunit biglang nagising, lumabas at nagkaroon ng lakas ng loob na makipag-usap. Pag-uusap na mahalagang sangkap ng kalayaan—lalo na nang mga panahong iyon na ipinagbawal ang malayang pamamahayag. Kung gusto nating lumaya, kailangang magkatagpo-tagpo tayo para sa makabuluhang pag-uusap. Mayroong nagsa-Moises sa atin, mga magigiting na mambabatas na bumuo ng Bagong Konstitusyon. Malaki ang naiambag ng mga pag-uusap nila para sa pananawing batas, at para hindi na muling mabawi ang ating kalayaan, para di na muling mapailalim sa mga kamay na bakal. Malaki ang naiambag ng mga bumalangkas ng isang malaya at demokratikong konstitusyon. Kaya iniingat natin. Iyon ang diwa ni Moises—na hindi tayo lalaya kung hindi tayo bubuo ng mga batas na patas na ayon sa kalooban ng Diyos na pinagmumulan ng lahat ng mga batas. Hindi malulubos ang kalayaan kung nakasulat nga ang mga ito pero hindi naman natin tinutupad o sinusunod. At hindi rin mapanatili ang kalayaan

kung hahayaan nating manipulahin ang batas para sa interes ng iilan, hindi ng nakararami. Linawin nating mabuti ang pagkakaiba ng people’s initiative sa politicians’ initiative. Kung ibig nilang igalang ang kanilang mandato ayon sa kasalukuyang Konstitusyon, ipakita muna nila na may paggalang din sila sa Konstitusyon na kanilang sinumpa.

Kaya bukod kay Moises, kailangan din natin ng mga Elias—mga propetang aantig sa konsensya ng bayan. Mga tagpagaalala na walang kuwenta ang batas kung malimutan natin ang tunay na pundasyon nito: KASUNDUAN ang pundasyon ng KAUTUSAN. Isang realasyon na humihingi ng katapatan. Kapag nawala ito, ang Batas ay pwede na namang gamitin sa pang-aapi sa mahihirap, pang-aabuso ng kapangyarihan at pang-aalipin sa mga maliliit at walang kalaban-laban. We have seen how the law has been weaponized by people who have no respect for it.

Kaya siguro may magkatulad ni Pedro sa kuwento na gustong sumabat sa pag-uusap, dahil sa takot at pangamba, dahil sa pagkawala ng tiwala—at ang suhestiyon ay magkanya-kanya na lang sila. Di ba’t natutukso rin tayo kung minsan na magduda kung mayroon nga ba tayong pinagkakaisahan bilang mga Filipino? Naalala ko tuloy ang eksena sa pelikulang Gomburza, nang tanungin ang isang katulong na katutubo—“Filipino ka ba?” At ang sagot niya ay “Tagalog po ako.” Baka nga hanggang ngayon wala pa ring kinalaman ang mga Tagalog sa mga Cebuano at Ilocano, o ang mga Kapampangan, Ilonggo o Bicolano sa isa’t isa. Na kanya-kanya pa rin tayo. Na baka matapos na mawala sa mga dayuhan ang kapangyarihan ay napasakamay lamang ito sa mga bagong amo na ang turing sa kapwa Filipino ay wala pa ring pinagkaiba sa turing ng mga kolonyal na Kastilang amo sa mga sinaunang “Indio.” Na baka hindi talaga mapagsasama ang Muslim, Kristiyano at Lumad, mga Protestante, Iglesia at Katoliko. Na baka nga mas makabubuting ang Mindanao ay bumukod na sa Luzon at Visayas, tulad ng mungkahi ng iba?

Ganyan ang panukala ng mga nadidiliman ng isip. Narito tayo dahil alam natin na ang EDSA ay isang UNFINISHED PROJECT, isang

Cannot agree more

By BISHPO PABLO VIRGILIO DAVID

ANACHRONISTIC is the least we can say about the antiquated attitudes towards communism as an ideology in the Philippines. Communism is not illegal in any country in Europe and in most other countries in the world. It is treated like any school of thought or ideology in democratic societies and in the open market of ideas. Communists are allowed to fight it out in the arena of parliamentary politics, including the parliament of the streets, as long as they fight it out legally—meaning nonviolently. In fact in some countries, communism doesn't even seem to mean what it used to mean anymore. It is not even an antithesis anymore to capitalism, as evidenced by State Capitalist China, which supposedly adheres to communism.

Ok, in the Philippines, we almost equate communists with armed insurgents. Good heavens, we're probably the only country in the world with the longest record of armed communist insurgency. It is one of the reasons, aside from the Moro insurgency in Mindanao, why governments are not succeeding in improving infrastructure in many of our rural communities, at least one of the easiest pretexts. It is also one reason why, despite the natural beauty of our islands and the rich biodiversity of our flora and fauna in our country, we attract less tourists. Despite the obviously dire consequences of labor exportation, we have not done much to keep the 12% of our population from joining the plight of OFWs in search of greener pastures abroad, even if our pastures are literally much greener

the whole year round and our natural resources definitely much richer than most countries in Asia. There is no sociologically valid reason why majority of our people should remain poor. We are a rich country with a majority poor citizenry because social justice and the common good has not been foremost among the concerns of many of the people to whom we entrust public governance.

How do you not expect people to take up arms if the act itself of expressing dissent or legally upholding the legitimate interests of the working classes is too easily regarded by law-enforcers as suspect, if dissenters are too quickly red-tagged, if legitimate protesters are hunted like "terrorists"? It's a "Which comes first, the chicken or the egg" kind of logic. Is taking up arms their essential expression of dissent, or are they taking up arms precisely because they are not allowed to express dissent without being subjected to state violence? Isn't the repressive military approach to this ideology actually making communism sound more romantic for college kids than it actually is? Many of the well-known former armed communists insurgents have grown old already!

Many former communists have retired and have already quietly reintegrated themselves in society. Many of them have already died, including the chief ideologue of the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology, the late poet and revolutionary, Joma Sison. Ironically, several hundreds of them are still languishing in jail up to now as "political detainees", some already

in their 80s and 90s, and are still being tried for political cases that have been criminalized into murder, homicide, and all other sorts of nonbailable offenses to make it impossible for them ever to be released. Is it possible that the antiquated tendency to include communist ideologies in anti-terror watchlists is coming from a kind of insecurity on the part of many high-budgeted military intelligence units about losing their *raison-d'etre*, or about being rendered totally irrelevant and treated as a waste of precious government funds?

And so, in response to the UN Special Rapporteur, Irene Khan's sensible proposal, I can only humbly say, I cannot agree more. It's about time! Let's give peace a chance! The following oracle was pronounced by the prophet Isaiah two thousand eight hundred years ago: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again." We can turn this prophecy into an advocacy. Wars, whether civil or international, do not benefit anyone except the big-time weapons producers and dealers. That is why they need to be justified by counter-ideologies who make their business thrive by fanning our collective paranoia and insecurity about an exaggerated need for defense. Check out the meaning of anachronism. Let's find a new job for red-taggers who have become redundant and irrelevant. I'm sure they're also getting bored with their jobs already. Peace!

Injustice and poverty cause child sexual abuse

By FR. SHAY CULLEN

THE Philippines is a very rich country ruled by a rich elite of dynastic political families. Once they get into power, it is almost impossible to get them out and when they do fall from power, they have accumulated so many billions of dollars they have enough money to make a political comeback as we all know from recent history. This kind of faulty democracy where the hungry sell their votes for the candidate with the most money directly results in dire poverty.

The outcome of dire poverty is that mothers have to work abroad. Most of the two million overseas workers are women and many are mothers with children. Many more mothers stay behind and they work in the formal and informal sector doing house cleaning and laundry and as sidewalk vendors, street cleaners and vendors. They comprise 46 percent of the workforce.

This means they are away from their families while working and the children are left at home when not in school. That makes the children very vulnerable to child sexual abuse. In fact, some estimates say that as many as 7,000,000 children suffer some form of child sexual abuse in the Philippines every year. According to research on-line the "2022 Disrupting Harm Study" conducted by UNICEF, ECPAT International, and Interpol, 20 percent of Internet-using Filipino children aged 12-17 were subjected to online sexual abuse and exploitation of children (OSAEC). They are part of the estimated 2 million children who have been victimized.

Lea is one of them. One evening, when she was only eight years old, she was watching television with her mother Junne. They were watching a program about teenage pregnancy. Her mother advised Lea that should anyone touch her inappropriately, she should immediately tell her mother about it. There and then, Lea broke down and suddenly cried, which alarmed her mother. Then Lea disclosed that her father Leo touched her private parts on numerous occasions. Outraged and angry, Junne confronted her partner about it but he denied



This April 21, 2020 file photo shows street dwellers sleep in an underpass in Manila. ROY LAGARDE

everything. Junne then reported Lea's disclosure to the barangay where they live (Calapacuan, Subic) and they were immediately referred to the local social worker. The local social worker realized that Lea was a sexually abused child at risk of being abducted and threatened by the partner if she made a formal complaint. She immediately referred Lea to the protection of Preda Home for Girls for healing to overcome the trauma.

In interviews with the Preda social worker, Lea disclosed that her father had raped and assaulted her five times. All incidents happened at night when her mother was away working on night shift and she and her siblings were left with their father. She did not tell anyone of the incidents earlier because he threatened to hurt her and her siblings. She had the powerful Emotional Release Therapy and cried and shouted at her father and punched the cushions as if punching him. She was fighting back. That released all the pent up hurt, shock and fear at the abuse of the father and his threats.

She became self-confident and

empowered to file a criminal complaint against her father. She bravely testified and told all that had been done to her. Then she withstood the strict cross-examination by the defense attorney and in the end was believed by Judge Gemma Theresa Hilario-Logronio. Last 08 January 2024, Leo was found guilty and convicted for the rape and assault of his eight-year-old daughter and sentenced to life in prison. The Preda Foundation children achieve an outstanding average of 18 -20 convictions every year.

According to government statistics (but don't blindly trust the figures as the poverty rate is likely to be a lot more) the inequality in the Philippines is among the worst in the world. Not only are 20 million in dire poverty, many are surviving on "pag-pag," that is the leftover scraps from dinner plates in fine restaurants. The poor boil and eat them to live. There are about 19,000-dollar millionaires in the Philippines but by 2026 that will rise to 33,000, according to Statista.

Julie is the child of another overseas working mother from

San Marcelino, Zambales. She was left with her half-brother Kevin when only seven years old and her mother went to work abroad due to poverty after she split up with her first husband. Julie was very vulnerable, unguarded and unprotected, and her half-brother Kevin began to sexually abuse her starting when he gave her a bath and began touching her private parts.

This continued for several years and when her mother returned, she worked for a rich family outside and the abuse continued until Julie finally told about the sexual abuse and Kevin was arrested and brought before the court. Julie testified to the abuse and he was convicted and jailed. There, he will not abuse any more children and hopefully repent and accept his penance. This is the second conviction for Preda children for 2024 and so long as the children are protected, supported, helped and empowered with therapy they will find the courage to bravely testify against their abusers.

Poverty is caused by the irresponsible rich who do not share their wealth to help end poverty

and lift up the poor. It's not wrong to earn money, it is how you earn it and use it. The corrupt rich use it to buy votes, pay bribes and corrupt others. They use dirty money for open-pit mining and destroy the environment and indigenous people. Other filthy rich use it for illegal logging and gambling, vice and murder. They exploit the poor and underpay workers in the plantations, farms, factories and sweatshops. Jesus said to them, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven! Indeed, it is easier for a rope to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven."

We are challenged to live a life of service to end suffering, poverty, sickness and hardship. We can do this by spending our money wisely to help others. The Good Samaritan not only bound up the wounds of the wounded man on the road himself, he shared his wine and oil and his transportation. He paid for the hospitalization and provided for the aftercare of the victim. We should do likewise and be good Samaritans to the abused and needy.



Diocese of Legazpi Circular No. 5, Series of 2024

To: All Clergy, Religious, and Lay Faithful

Re: Reverence in the Eucharist: Reaffirming the Posture of Kneeling

Dear Sisters, dear Brothers,

In our continuous journey of faith and devotion, it is essential to reflect deeply on our liturgical practices, especially those that express our reverence and adoration towards the Most Holy Eucharist. The Eucharistic Prayer, being the center and high point of the Holy Mass, calls for our utmost respect and solemnity. It is in this light that we wish to communicate an important update regarding our posture during this sacred part of the Mass.

During the 127th Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Bishops' Conference

of the Philippines (CBCP) held on 27-29 January 2024, a decision has been made, consistent with previous directives of the CBCP, concerning our posture during the Eucharistic Prayer. This decision reaffirms the practice of kneeling after the Consecration until after the concluding doxology or Great Amen. This directive, effective immediately, serves to deepen our collective reverence for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist and aligns with the guidelines set forth by the CBCP and the General Instructions of the Roman Missal (GIRM).

This decision to reaffirm the practice of kneeling is not new but a return to our long-established tradition. Before the 1990s, it was customary to kneel after the Sanctus until after the Amen. Changes in the

1990s and subsequent discussions have led us to revisit and ultimately return to this practice, ensuring it is in harmony with the present GIRM (#4), as approved by the CBCP.

To ensure that this transition embraced by all with understanding and grace, may we ask our priests and catechists to kindly dedicate time throughout the entire month of March 2024 for teaching and explaining this directive to the faithful. Through homilies, catechetical instructions, and announcements, let us provide the theological background, the historical context, and the spiritual significance of kneeling during the Eucharistic Prayer. This effort will not only educate our community but also foster a deeper appreciation for the liturgy and a more profound encounter with the Real Presence of

Christ.

Finally, we would like to reiterate the CBCP's guidance on the orans gesture during Our Father, indicating that it remains optional. The faithful may adopt any appropriate gesture during this prayer, allowing for personal expressions of piety and reverence.

May our shared reverence for the Eucharist bring us closer to the heart of Christ and each other.

In the PEACE that binds us all,

+JOEL Z. BAYLON, D.D.
Bishop of Legazpi

3 March 2024
Third Sunday of Lent



EDSA and our continuing revolution

IN the spirit of the EDSA Revolution, we must urgently address the root causes of social injustice and pursue peace across the Philippine archipelago, especially as recent conflicts in Negros, Bohol, and Mindanao starkly contrast our aspirations for harmony.

As we commemorate the transformative power of EDSA, it is imperative to recognize that the path to lasting peace is intertwined with the pursuit of justice, as articulated by the late Bishop Antonio Y. Fortich of Bacolod. The ongoing violence and loss of Filipino lives demand a reevaluation of priorities, shifting from military modernization to the essential work of fostering justice for all.

We urgently call for the following:

1. Address the Root Causes of Conflict: We demand the government prioritize the pursuit of genuine peace by directly addressing the underlying social injustices fueling unrest in the Philippines. Peace must be founded on the principles of justice for all.

2. Protect the Legacy of EDSA: We call upon the Filipino people to actively remember and safeguard the democratic values and civilian supremacy established by the EDSA People Power Revolution. These are non-negotiable tenets of our nation's identity and must be preserved against any attempts to undermine them.

3. Resist Self-Serving Constitutional Changes: We stand firmly against any efforts to alter

the 1987 Constitution in ways that could erode the democratic progress achieved since EDSA 1986. We must collectively oppose changes that threaten the balance of power between civilian governance and military authority.

4. Renew and Commit to Peace Talks: We advocate for the immediate resumption of peace talks between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP). These discussions must earnestly aim to resolve the deep-seated issues of poverty and injustice that afflict our people.

5. A Collective Prayer and Action for Peace: We invite all Filipinos to join in prayer for peace but also

to engage in a peaceful revolution through actions that promote justice, unity, and reconciliation. Let our prayers be manifested in our deeds as we work towards a harmonious society.

Together, let us forge a path towards a peaceful and just Philippines, where every citizen's rights are protected, and the shadows of conflict are dispelled by the light of understanding and mutual respect.

Let us all, as a nation, pray and act for peace, embodying the true spirit of EDSA in our pursuit of a just and peaceful society.

+MOST REV. GERARDO ALMINAZA
D.D.
Bishop of the Diocese of San Carlos
25 February 2024



Statement on the 1st anniversary of Mindoro oil spill

"Our country is in peril. All the living systems on land and in the seas around us are being ruthlessly exploited. The damage to date is extensive and, sad to say, it is often irreversible.

One does not need to be an expert to see what is happening and to be profoundly troubled by it. Within a few short years, brown eroded hills have replaced luxuriant forests in many parts of the country. We see dried-up riverbeds where, not so long ago, streams flowed throughout the year. Farmers tell us that, because of erosion and chemical poisoning, the yield from the croplands has fallen substantially. Fishermen and experts on marine life have a similar message. Their fish catches are shrinking due to the extensive destruction of coral reefs and mangrove forests. The picture emerging in every province of the country is clear and bleak. The attack on the natural world which benefits very few Filipinos is rapidly whittling away at the very base of our living world and endangering its fruitfulness for future generations..."

Nearly four decades ago, our predecessors in the CBCP wrote

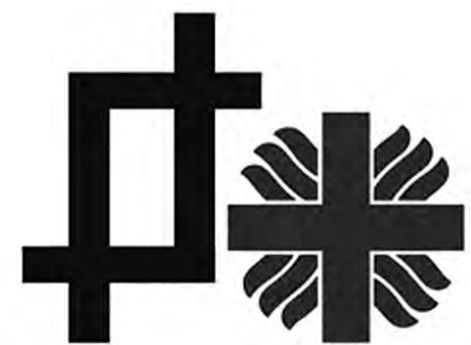
the Pastoral Letter on Ecology entitled "What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?" – one of the first lamentations on the ailing health of our Common Home, which was also an exhortation for action and courage to protect it.

Today, we reflect on these words as we near the 1st anniversary of a tragedy in what is known as the Amazon of the Oceans – our very own Verde Island Passage (VIP). On February 28, 2023, this marine biodiversity hotspot fell victim to massive destruction from 900,000 liters of industrial oil that spilled from the sunken MT Princess Empress. For over half a year afterward, thousands of fisherfolk and other sectors were robbed of their means of living. Families had little to eat, and many also suffered illnesses from exposure to pollution. Thousands of hectares of mangroves and seagrasses were placed in peril, and so was the very fabric of life in our seas. The gravity of impacts has yet to be fully measured and continues to ripple today and in years to come.

As we near one year since the oil spill happened in the VIP, we decry the continued elusiveness

of accountability on the part of companies behind the oil spill, and erring authorities that contributed to the incident. We also lend our voice to the call for justice for victims of the oil spill and for sufficient and timely compensation that genuinely takes into account the damages that fisherfolk communities incur and continue to incur.

We must note that the oil spill tragedy also indeed became a backdrop for action and compassion among the people of Mindoro and the many individuals and organizations who heeded the call for solidarity. And today, we need that same solidarity—for justice for our brothers and sisters that were affected, and to call for action so that the Verde Island Passage would never again be subjected to a tragedy like the said oil spill in the future. It is crucial to take a stand together as this paradise, this underwater Eden, continues to be threatened—by ships ferrying toxic cargos, build-out of gas and LNG power plants and terminals, extractive and industrial activities, and other problems.



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF THE PHILIPPINES
NASSA/Caritas Philippines

"The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein..." (Ps 24:1)

In the service of the Church of the Poor,

MOST REV. GERARDO A. ALMINAZA, D.D.
Lead Convenor
CBCP National Laudato Si Program
Eco Convergence National Hub Vice-Chair, Caritas Philippines

MOST REV. JOSE COLIN M. BAGAFORO, D.D.
President, Caritas Philippines
Chairman, CBCP Episcopal Commission on Social Action, Justice, and Peace (ECSA-JP)

MOST REV. PABLO VIRGILIO S. DAVID, D.D.
President, Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines

20 February 2024

EVERYDAY JESUS

By ARCHBISHOP SOCRATES VILLEGAS

www.fathersoc.com

Respectful God

CHILDREN are expected to respect their parents. Younger people are expected to respect their elders. The laity are expected to respect priests. The priests are expected to respect their bishops. And the principle is—the higher, the more experienced, the older, the more deserving of respect.

If we follow the same principle, then God is not expected to respect anybody because He is the highest. He is perfect. He is the oldest, so to speak, although He is beyond time. Following that principle, God owes no respect to anybody because He is the highest, He is the most that can ever be. And yet here is God, respecting a lowly handmaid of Nazareth and asking that handmaid, "May I?" Here is God who created the world, who sustains the world, stooping and showing an act of respect to a teenage girl and says to her, "Will you please?" If God were using Filipino, He would say, "Puwede po ba?"

Such love! You know, if there is any lesson that the Annunciation teaches us, it is that respect is not only to be given to the more experienced, to the older, to the higher or the one with greater authority. Respect must be given to everybody and the mark of a real Christian is that we are able to give respect. We are able to reverence even those whom society considers lower than ourselves.

If the Annunciation is to be a meaningful feast for us, isn't it time for bosses to be more respectful to the janitors and for the employers to be more respectful to the yayas, to the helpers, and to the drivers? Isn't it an act of Christian faith that we do not only show respect to persons, but also that we show respect to a tree that has been there for years, to the plants, to the dog, to the cat, to any animal?

I feel in my heart that there is no peace in the world because we have lost our capacity to show respect for everybody and for everything.

Prayer is strength

PRAYER is our strength. Prayer is a strong tool. Where does prayer get its strength? The strength of prayer does not come from the one who prays. The strength of prayer comes from the one to whom it is addressed.

In other words, prayer does not become a strong tool because we pray. Prayer becomes strong on account of the God to whom we pray. We only become strong if we depend on God. Our strength does not come from within us. Our strength comes from outside of us, from the one we lean on, from the

one we depend on, from the one we stand on.

When we pray, we become strong, not because prayer in itself is strength. We become strong not because of our own strength but on account of the one to whom we pray. Let us not forget that principle because sometimes we begin to think that when we pray, God becomes weaker, when we pray we have the power to change God. That is not the intention of prayer. The strength of prayer does not come from us. The strength of prayer comes from the one we rely on: God!

Thoughts to live by

Reflections on 3rd Sunday of Lent, March 3, 2024

By CARDINAL ORLANDO B. QUEVEDO

1. FIRST Reading, Ex. 20: 1-17 or 20:1-3, 7-8, 12-17—The 10 Commandments given by God to Moses. Our 1st Reading does not say how many commandments there were. Notes from the New American Bible—Our Catholic tradition holds that there are ten commandments. In fact, Ex. 34:28; Dt. 4:13 and 10:4 refer to them as "the 10 words." That they were originally written on two tablets appears in Ex. 32:15-16; 34: 28-29; Dt. 4:13 and 10:2-4. The commandments differ in length and are the "privileged expression of God's moral demands on Israel... on the basis of the covenant being concluded on Sinai."

2. "Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall not have other gods beside me" (vv. 1-3). "You shall not make yourself an idol or a likeness of anything... you shall not bow before them or serve them. For I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God." God inflicts punishment for their ancestors' wickedness down to the 3rd and 4th generation, but loves down to the thousandth generation those who love him and keep his commandments (vv. 4-6).

3. "You shall not invoke the name of the Lord, your God in vain" (v. 7, this includes swearing falsely). "Remember the sabbath day - keep it holy" for God rested on the 7th day [of creation]. "That is why the Lord has blessed the sabbath day and made it holy" (vv. 8-11).

4. The first part of the commandments refer to God. The 2nd part refer to one's fellow Israelites. "Honor your father and mother, that you may have a long

life" in the Promised Land (v. 12). "You shall not kill" (v. 13). "You shall not commit adultery" (v. 14). "You shall not steal" (v. 15). "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (v. 16). "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife... or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (v. 17).

5. Resp. Ps. 19:8, 9, 10, 11—"The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul.... The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart.... The statutes of the Lord are true, all of them just; more desirable than gold, sweeter also than honey" (vv. 8-11). The Psalm is a perfect supplement to the 1st Reading.

6. 2nd Reading, 1 Cor. 1:22-25—To human eyes, the crucified Christ symbolizes impotence and absurdity. But he is true wisdom and power. "For Jews demand signs and Greek look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (vv. 22-24). "For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (v. 25). Recall Paul's own boast in his weakness.

7. Gospel, Jn. 2:13-25—The cleansing of the temple. Jesus goes up to Jerusalem. The Passover is near. He finds that the temple area has been made a market place. He makes a whip, made of cord, drives out the sellers, money changers, and animals. He overturns tables, spilling coins to the floor (vv. 13-15). He says, "Stop making my Father's house a market place" (v. 16), recalling what Ps.69:10 says, "Zeal for your house has consumed

me" (v. 17).

8. The Jews ask why Jesus is clearing out the marketplace. Jesus says, "Destroy this temple and in 3 days I will raise it up." He is referring to the post-resurrectional replacement of the temple by his person (for this saying about the destruction of the temple, see Mt. 24:2, 27:40; Mk. 13:2, 15-29; Lk. 21:6; cf. Acts 6:14). The Jews sneer at him for claiming what is impossible. "This temple has been under construction for 46 years and you will raise it up in 3 days?" (v. 20). After the resurrection, his disciples remembered what He had said, "and they came to believe in him (v. 22). Seeing the signs he was doing, many in Jerusalem begin to believe in him.

9. The Liturgy of the Word this Sunday speaks of God's infinite compassion for those who love him. Those who love God are those who obey his commandments. His commandments give joy to the heart (1st Reading and Res. Ps). Love of God is the other side of faith in the Triune God. At the height and depth of this love and faith, is belief in Jesus, as the crucified Christ. He is the human Christ, the God, who totally empties himself of power and divinity. Yet while it seems absurd, the crucified Christ is the power and wisdom of God.

10. Prayer—O God, author of every mercy and of all goodness, you have shown us a remedy for sin in fasting, prayer, and thanksgiving. Look graciously at our confession of lowliness, that we, who are bowed down by our conscience, may always be lifted up by your mercy. This we ask through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Prayers, best wishes, God bless!



You are the man!

Reflection for Friday of the 2nd Week of Lent, 1 March 2024, Mt 21:33-43, 45-46

By BISHOP PABLO VIRGILIO DAVID

TODAY'S Gospel reading reminds me of that story in the 2nd book of Samuel chapter 11 about the sin of David. Remember that passage about David having an affair with Bathsheba, the wife of his soldier Uriah? How he sent his soldier to the battlefield and had him positioned in the frontlines so that he would die in battle and David could take Bathsheba home as his wife? What was he thinking? That that was the end of the story? That nobody knew about it? Well, the story continues in chapter 12. There we are told how the prophet Nathan would drop by the palace for a casual visit and engage the King in a casual conversation. He would tell him a story about two men—one, a rich man who had flocks and herds of great numbers, and a poor farmer who had a little lamb, which he treasured as his only possession. The prophet would tell David how the rich man prepared a lamb as a meal for his visitor. And how, instead of taking from his own flocks and herds, he took the poor man's little lamb, had it slaughtered and served at his table?

The author then tells us how King David reacted with rage at the prophet's story and blurted out that that rich man was cruel and deserved to die. Then the prophet looked into his eyes and, pointing at him, said, "You are the man!"

In the Gospel, Jesus is also telling a story a landowner who entrusted his vineyard to his tenant farmers. He is addressing it as a parable to the chief priests and the elders of the people—the ones who would later have him crucified. He tells them how the tenant farmers not only refused to give the landowner his share of the harvest to the servants whom he had sent. How they seized his servants, beat them up and killed some of them. And how the landowner eventually decided to send his own son thinking they would respect him, how they also beat him up, dragged him out of the vineyard and killed him. Following the prophet Nathan's style, Jesus shifts to an interactive mode and asks his audience, "What should be done to those cruel and wretched servants?" They answer in

unison, "They should die!" The only difference here is, Jesus does not even say, "You are those tenants!" But at the end of the story, Matthew tells us they realized that "he was speaking about them."

Have you ever attended Mass and, while listening to the homily, suddenly felt like God was addressing you personally and bringing you to a realization or a change of heart? The charismatics have a word for it—you feel "convicted". There is a saying goes, "When you point an accusing finger at someone, do not forget that three others are pointing at you." Perhaps, that is why Jesus said, "Do not judge and you will not be judged." And "The measure with which you measure will be measured out to you."

I think, of all Popes who have ever led the Roman Catholic Church, it's Pope Francis who has brought across this same message most strongly especially to people who have a tendency to be judgmental towards others. People who are quick at labeling others, like those in irregular marital situations, as



sinners. People who think of the Church as an exclusive company of the righteous. On many occasions, he has reminded people that the best antidote to the tendency to self-righteousness is the reminder

that we are all sinners. There is one line in Psalm 130 that expresses this beautifully, the third verse which says, "If you O Lord should keep a record of all our sins, who can stand?"

Press Releases of Caritas Philippines

February 15, 2024

Caritas Philippines demands mining moratorium: Floods expose Mindanao's wounds, systemic change needed



The Coast Guard District Southeastern Mindanao joins flood relief efforts in Davao region. CGBSEM

AS cries for help echo from flood-ravaged communities in Mindanao, Caritas Philippines demands a nationwide moratorium on mining, calling it a critical step to prevent

future tragedies and address systemic issues that exacerbate disasters.

"The recent devastation in Mindanao is not a natural disaster alone," declared Caritas Philippines

Vice President Bishop Gerardo Alminaza. "It's a man-made tragedy fueled by greed and irresponsible practices. Weak governance, political dynasties, and rampant mining have created a ticking time bomb, and it just exploded."

Caritas Philippines has mobilized its Emergency Operational Center (EOC) and deployed initial relief of Php 900,000 to affected dioceses. However, Fr. Antonio Labiao, Jr., Caritas Philippines Executive Director, emphasizes, "Relief is crucial, but it's like bandaging a wound without addressing the infection. We need a systemic change, and that starts with stopping the bleeding—a nationwide moratorium on mining."

"Irresponsible mining practices have ravaged our environment," Fr. Labiao continues, his voice ringing with urgency. "Deforestation, soil destabilization, and altered

water flow—these are not just statistics, they're the very reasons our communities are drowning. We demand a moratorium to halt the ongoing damage and hold a national conversation. Is profit more important than people's lives? Is the short-term gain worth sacrificing future generations?"

Caritas Philippines demands more than just a pause on mining. They advocate for:

- Sustainable development and environmental protection: "We cannot continue plundering our resources," warns Bishop Alminaza. "We need sustainable practices that respect the environment and prioritize the well-being of future generations."

- Good governance and transparency: "We need leaders who prioritize the well-being of their people, not their own interests," Bishop Alminaza states.

"Accountability and responsible resource management are crucial to building resilience."

- Breaking the cycle of political dynasties: "Concentrated power stifles diverse voices and hinders inclusive development," Fr. Labiao explains. "We urge Filipinos to elect representatives who truly serve the needs of their communities."

Caritas Philippines stands with the people of Mindanao, urging the government, mining companies, and all stakeholders to take immediate action. "Together, we can build a more just, sustainable, and resilient future for all Filipinos," Fr. Labiao concludes, "but that future cannot be built on the backs of broken communities and a ravaged environment. The moratorium is just the first step—we must rise above self-interest and choose a path that heals our land and empowers our people."

February 22, 2024

Koalisyon Laban sa ChaCha: End ChaCha madness, address people's true concerns instead

MEMBERS of Koalisyon Laban sa ChaCha trooped to Plaza Roma on Thursday, February 22, to pray for the country and gather against the continued push for Charter Change.

Coalition members, composed of various religious groups and people's organizations, urged the government to instead focus on addressing Filipinos' true concerns—amplifying the calls for ending hunger and poverty, creating better jobs and pushing for higher wages, providing affordable housing, ensuring quality education, preserving the environment, and protecting human rights.

"We pray that our leaders will not be led into the temptation of changing the Constitution for power and riches but instead be steadfast in fulfilling their duties and responsibilities as servant-leaders of the people," said Kidapawan Bishop Jose Colin Bagaforo, Chair of the CBCP Episcopal Commission for Social Action, Justice and Peace, who is one of the convenors of the Koalisyon.

Sen. Risa Hontiveros, another Koalisyon convenor, called on other government officials to deeply reflect on their role in society and follow the

call of Pope Francis to engage in a better kind of politics for the common good.

"We have been selected by the people to serve their interests and not to be served. I hope my fellow lawmakers and other government officials realize this in their reflection and finally shun the present push for ChaCha," Hontiveros said.

Koalisyon Laban sa ChaCha's mass action started with an ecumenical gathering comprising three parts: Panaghoy, Panalangin, and Paninindigan, signifying the group's collective call for discernment against any attempt to alter the Constitution that could undermine democratic principles and people's rights.

In Panaghoy, sectoral and community leaders highlighted the lived experience of the poor and their pressing concerns such as hunger, joblessness, climate change, and human rights.

Josua Mata from Kalipunan ng Kilusang Masa and Nagkaisa Labor Coalition reminded legislators of the teachings by the Church on the life and dignity of the human person and labor and urged them to uphold this instead of prioritizing ChaCha.

"Ang mga mahihirap at mga manggagawa dapat ang pangunahing binibigyan ng atensyon ng ating gubyerno. Sana nakikikinig ang ating mga lider sa hinaing natin at mangungunang tumugon sa mga ito. Gubyerno dapat ang nangungunang siguraduhin na sa usapin ng kaunlaran, walang maiiwan, lalo na ang mga mahihirap rating kababayan," Mata said.

Meanwhile, in Panalangin, priests, religious men and women, and pastors led the Koalisyon members in prayer and spoke about the ethical and moral concerns surrounding ChaCha, as well as the profound responsibility of every Christian to uphold our faith-based values and principles.

"Ang Pilipinas nga raw ang lupang hinirang. Patuloy sana tayong pagpalain ng Diyos at gabayan, lalong lalo na sa mga importanteng desisyon na makakaapekto 'di lang sa atin, kundi pati na rin sa mga susunod na henerasyon," said Fr. Arnel Glodobe, O Carm, of Caritas Philippines.

Finally, in Paninindigan, convenors of the coalition laid out campaign plans and actions to raise awareness on ChaCha and defeat proposals to



Protesters from the "Koalisyon Laban sa ChaCha" rally against Charter change at Plaza Roma in Intramuros, Manila on February 22, 2024. CBCP NEWS

change the Constitution, with a shared commitment to raise awareness against the present plans for Charter change

AKBAYAN Youth's Justine Balane appealed to the younger generation to be a good example of being Filipino youth, and even those in positions of power, by committing to campaign against ChaCha.

"We are taught that the young should be an example in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity. May all Filipino youth fulfill this calling through their advocacy to preserve

the soul of the nation," Balane said.

Paeng David of Tindig Pilipinas/Buhay ang EDSA Campaign Network expressed hope that, just like during the People Power Revolution, all Filipinos may be guided by their faith to see the truth and act for the betterment of the country.

"We in the Koalisyon Laban sa ChaCha will continue to pray for every Filipino that they may continue to reflect and see through the smoke and mirrors of ChaCha," David said. "May God help us in our continued fight."

Pagbabagong-anyo / B3

WORK IN PROGRESS. Na hindi magtatagumpay ang diwang ito kung isusuko natin. Ano nga ba ang saysay ng EDSA:

-kung wala pa ring makitang kinabukasan ang mga kababayan nating taga-probinsiya kundi ang lumikas at makipanirahan sa mga gilid-gilid ng mga mauunlad na siyudad? Di balang iskwater makahanap lang ng mapagkakitaan kahit minimum?

-Ano'ng saysay kung wala pa ring katarungang panlipunan? Kung ang kayamanan ng bayan ay nasa kamay lang ng iilang pamilya at ang mga dukha ay walang ibang pinapangarap kundi ang makapag-abroad bilang OFWs?

-Ano ang saysay kung wala pa ring choice ang mga kapatid na Moro sa Mindanao kundi ang humawak ng armas para lang maipagtanggol ang kanilang mga lupa sa mga ibig mangamkam nito, kung tatawaging "komunista" ang mga trabahador kapag sumali sa mga unyon at humingi ng tamang sahod, kung ire-red tag pati mga kooperatiba ng mga magsasaka dahil ayaw magpakontrol sa mga kapitalista? Kung laging delikadong matawag na terorista kahit ordinaryong mga aktibista? Ano ang kahihinatnan natin kung gigiyerahin ng Pilipino ang kapwa Pilipino? Payayamanin lang natin ang mga industriya ng armas. Walang makikinabang sa ganyan kundi ang mga dayuhan na laging nakaabang na samantalain ang ating kahinaan o sakupin na naman tayo. Alam natin kung sino ang mga dating dayuhang amo; at kung sino

ang bagong nakaabang na manakop sa mga teritoryo natin.

Ano ang saysay ng EDSA kung tatanggapin na lang natin ang korapsyon sa gubyerno bilang normal na "kalakaran"? Kung maging bahagi na ng kultura natin ang "pangungumisyon" sa lahat ng uri ng serbisyong pampubliko? Kung ang mga pondong galing sa buwis na ibinabayad ng mga mamamayan ay gawing confidential funds o intelligence funds ng mga pamilyang mahusay magpatron para manatili sa puwesto? Kung ang inaasahan ng taumbayan sa mga lingkod-bayan ay laging ayuda imbes na good governance? Kung hindi na natututong magsulat at magbasa ang mga istudyante dahil sa depektibong sistema ng edukasyon? Kung di na natin sila maturuang kumilatis sa pagkakaiba ng information sa disinformation? Kung nabubulok sa bilangguanan ang mga akusadong walang pambayad piyansa at abogado dahil sa depektibong sistema ng hustisya? Kung hindi na natin mapanagot sa batas ang mga tiwali at mapang-abuso sa gubyerno, kung hindi na tayo marunong pumili ng tamang mamumuno?

Kailangang balikan at gunitain diwa ng EDSA dahil maraming mga kalituan na dapat linawin at mga pagkakamali na dapat tuwiran sa mga sumunod na pangyayari mula noong 1986. Kaya kailangan ang pag-uusap at pakikinig at pagkilatis. Kung patuloy tayong maniniwala na ang paghalal ng mga bagong lider ay sapat na para mapabago at mapaunlad ang bayan

natin uulit-ulitin lang natin ang mga pagkakamali ng nakaraan. Maraming puwersa ang nagtagpo-tagpo sa EDSA, may kani-kaniyang papel ang bawat isa—simbahan, negosyante, kabataan, sundalo't kapulisan, eskwelahan, oposisyon, mga kilusan at puwersang demokratiko atbp. Kapag hindi malinaw kung anong papel ang dapat gampanan ng bawat isa, talagang pupulutin tayo sa kangkungan.

Minsan talagang nakakatukso ang magsa-Pedro na lang—ang magsabing magkanya-kanya na lang kaya muna tayo? Na magsaulian na lang ng kandila sina Ate Luz, Ate Vi at Ate Minda? Iyan ay bunga ng pagdidilim ng isip na madalas mangyari sa mga taong natatakot, nasisiran ng loob, nawawalan ng tiwala sa sarili, sa kapwa-tao at sa Diyos.

Sa araw na ito ng ika-38 anibersaryo ng EDSA PPR, may tinig pa ring maririnig kahit sa gitna ng madilim na ulap, tinig na magbibigay pag-asa, tinig ng langit na magpapalinaw na ang minsang nasaksihan nating kadakilaan sa EDSA, kahit parang panandalian lang ay may maraming aral na maituturo sa atin. Sa pag-uusap na makabuluhan sa tanglaw ng Salita ng Diyos ayon kay Moises at Elias, sa pakikinig at pakikiisa sa Salitang nagkatawag tao kay Hesukristo, magaganap din ang ating sariling pagbabagong-anyo. Kaya umalingawngaw ang paanyaya ng langit, "Ito ang minamahal kong Anak. Makinig kayo sa kanya." Makinig sa bukodtanging makapagtuturo sa atin ng tamang pag-uusap na may paggalang, pagkilatis at kahandaang

maghandog ng sarili.

Kaya bumalik tayo sa pag-uusap kung ibig nating malubos ang pinangarap sa EDSA, kung ibig natin ng mapayapang paraan ng pagbabago, iwaksi na ang karahasan. Saksi ako kung paano naging huwaran ng maraming bansa sa buong mundo ang Pilipinas dahil sa nangyari sa EDSA. Tandang-tanda ko pa, iyun taon na napadpad ako sa Belgium para sa aking Licentiate program na nagsimula noong September 1986. Dahil mga bagong estudyante kaming lahat at international, nagpakilala muna kami sa isa't-isa. Nang sabihin ko na ako'y Filipino, sabi ng professor, "You mean you come from the country that gave the world a shining example of a peaceful revolution? Bravo!" At pumalakpak silang lahat. Naulit ang palakpak na iyon nang bumalik ako para simulan ang aking Doctoral program. Ang pinalakpakan naman namin noon 1989 ay ang gumaya sa ating EDSA PPR—ang mga mamamayan ng Berlin, na nauwi sa pagkabagsak ng Berlin wall. Mula noon, sunod sunod na naganap ang iba pang mga PPR na nagbunga ng kalayaan ng maraming mga bansa sa Eastern Europe nang walang dumanak na dugo at bumuwag sa dating USSR. Tama ang sinasabi ng theme song ng EDSA: "Handog ng Pilipino sa mundo—mapayapang paraang pagbabago."

Kung ibig natin ng pag-unlad para sa lahat, hindi lang para sa iilan, ituloy ang pag-uusap. Kaya tinayuan ng dambana ang EDSA, para may lugar kung saan pwedeng magkatagpo

ang lahat ng handang makilahok sa kakaiibang klase ng pamamanata. Pamamanata, hindi para sa sarili o para sa anak, magulang o kaanak, kundi para sa bayan. Di ba binibigkas natin araw-araw ang panatang iyon nang tayo'y mga mag-aaral pa? ANG PANATANG MAKABAYAN? Panata na "iibigin natin ang Pilipinas, dahil ito ang lupang ating sinilangan, ito ang tahanan ng ating lahi, ang bayang kumukupkop sa atin upang tayo'y maging malakas, maligaya at kapakinabang?" Di ba't namanata tayo na "makikinig tayo sa payo ng ating mga nakatatanda, na tutupad tayo sa mga alituntunin at batas bilang mga mamamayang matapat at makabayan? Na lagi tayong magsisikap na maging tunay na Filipino sa isip, sa salita at sa gawa?"

Ang naging simbolo ng EDSA ay si Maria, Birhen ng Kapayapaan. Na ito ang ating misyon bilang isang bayan—ang ihandog sa mundo ang isang regalo—mapayapang paraan ng pagbabago. Na ang katotohanan, kalayaan at katarungan ay kayang makamit na walang dahas, basta't pagsumikap nating makilahok sa pag-uusap, makipagkaisang puso at diwa, makibahagi sa paghahatid ng mabuting balita—na ang nasaksihan nating isang munting sandali ng kadakilaan ng pagbabagong-anyo kung atin gugunitain, sasariwain at paghinatnan ay patuloy na magpapabago sa ating bansa upang makamit natin ang isang lipunang tunay na mapayapa, maunlad, patas, at malaya.

Orientation seminar, workshop prepares new volunteers for prison service

AS part of its continued push to cater to the physical and spiritual wellbeing of persons deprived of liberty (PDLs), the Church's prison ministry arm conducted an orientation seminar and workshop for around thirty new prison service volunteers in Northern Luzon.

Held at the Archbishop's Residence in Tuguegarao City and led by the CBCP's Episcopal Commission on Prison Pastoral Care (ECPPC), the event's attendees hailed from key areas within the Archdiocese of Tuguegarao.

ECPPC executive assistant Gerry Bernabe, told CBCP news that the participants of the one-day seminar and workshop were given insight into "necessary skills and

knowledge that they would need in order to become more effective in their work as volunteers in prison service."

Providing context for the day's sessions, the first talk, given by JO2 Martel Dayacus, Interfaith Program Monitoring Officer of the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP) Regional Office 2, was a situational report on the current profile and status of the jail system in the province.

This was followed by a lecture on the dignity of the human person and an introduction on the biblical basis of the prison ministry delivered by CBCP-ECPPC executive secretary Fr. Nezele Lirio.

Atty. Mitoy Cayosa, Dean of University of Cagayan Valley College of Law, afterwards

delved into the pillars of the criminal justice system and paralegal assistance for persons deprived of liberty.

Advocating for the Church's push for restorative justice, Bernabe, who is also the National Coordinator for Volunteers in Prison Service, led a session on the basic principles of restorative justice which was followed by a discussion on integrated pastoral program for the rehabilitation of the prison society led by CBCP-ECPPC Pastoral Program Officer Michael Bartolome.

A Holy Mass was also celebrated at Arzobispado de Tuguegarao Chapel as part of the event, and a distribution of certificates to all the attendees and the guest speakers. **(Nikko Balbedina)**



Attendees pose for a souvenir photo during the orientation seminar and workshop for prison service volunteers held at the Archbishop's Residence in Tuguegarao City, Feb 10, 2024. CBCP-ECPPC

Migrant affairs workers empowered in 11th annual Exodus Formation Program



Participants and delegates pose for a group photo during the 11th annual Exodus Formation Program for migrant affairs workers and volunteers. CBCP-ECMI PHOTO

IN its eleventh year, the Exodus Formation program for missionaries catering to overseas Filipinos and their families continued its mission to empower, support, and uplift communities abroad, fostering a sense of belonging and connection among Filipino expatriates worldwide.

Held from Feb 12-17 at the Manila Prince Hotel, this year's formation program

draw attendees from India and the Philippines.

Representatives from the Conference of the Catholic Bishops of India (CCBI) expressed keen interest in learning from the Philippine Church's exemplary practices in pastoral care for migrants and itinerant people.

With participation from three Archbishops, two bishops, and representatives from various dioceses in

India, the seminar boasted a diverse audience prepared to take on the Lord's work of catering to those far from home.

Led by Bishop Narciso Abellana, Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (ECMI) chairman, the program delved into migration concerns, encompassing both Church and government perspectives.

Support for the event came from the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development with a session on Migrants, Seafarers and Refugee Issues delivered by the dicastery's regional coordinator for Asia Dr. Francesca Donà.

The seminar's impact extends beyond borders, fostering collaboration and sharing best practices in pastoral care worldwide. **(CBCP-ECMI)**

Church's healthcare arm accompanies prisoners suffering from TB



Fr. Dan Cancino of the CBCP Episcopal Commission on Health Care visits persons deprived of liberty suffering from multidrug-resistant tuberculosis Regional Infirmary of the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology in Region 4-A. CBCP-EHC PHOTO

IN an effort to combat the rise of multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB) in the Philippines and to live Christ's teaching to provide care for the sick, the Church's healthcare arm embarked on a mission to accompany persons deprived of liberty (PDLs) suffering from MDR-TB in one of the country's provincial jails.

Led by the CBCP's Episcopal Commission on Health Care (EHC), along with partners, visited MDR-TB patients in the Regional Infirmary in Region 4-A, celebrating the Holy Eucharist and administering the Sacrament of the Anointing of

the Sick and Reconciliation.

MDR-TB is on the rise in the Philippines, a country burdened with a high number of tuberculosis cases, particularly among prisoners, as reported by the World Health Organization (WHO).

In a Facebook post, EHC executive secretary Fr. Dan Cancino emphasized the reality of sickness, highlighting the importance of hope and the closeness of God.

He added that the visit aimed to provide spiritual and emotional support to MDR-TB patients while also raising awareness about the disease and the importance of proper treatment and prevention measures.

"The Philippines has a population of 120 million and has a high-burden of both tuberculosis with an estimated 310,000 new cases each year and multidrug-resistant TB especially amongst those in prisons," Cancino said.

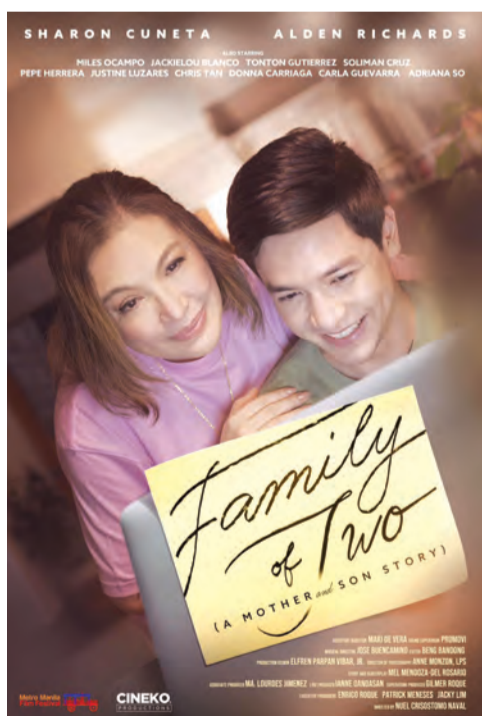
"Sickness is real," he added "but hope and the closeness of God is also real."

The Church's initiative underscores the crucial role of community organizations in addressing public health challenges and promoting holistic care for those affected by tuberculosis.

Through partnerships and compassionate outreach efforts, organizations like the Church's healthcare arm contribute significantly to the fight against tuberculosis and other health crises in vulnerable populations. **(Nikko Balbedina)**

CBCP CINEMA

Movie Reviews



Family of Two

Technical assessment: 3.5
Moral assessment: 4
MTRCB rating: G
CINEMA rating: VA (Viewers of All Ages)

DIRECTOR: Nuel Crisostomo Naval
 LEAD CAST: Sharon Cuneta, Alden Richards, Miles Ocampo
 SCREENWRITER: Mel Mendoza-Del Rosario
 CINEMATOGRAPHER: Anne Monzon
 MUSICAL DIRECTOR: Jose Buencamino
 PRODUCER: CineKo Productions
 EDITOR: Beng Bandong
 GENRE: Drama
 DISTRIBUTOR: Axinite Diginema Inc.
 LOCATION: Philippines
 RUNNING TIME: 100 minutes

FAMILY of Two is about a loving son, Mateo (Alden Richards), and his devoted mother, Maricar (Sharon Cuneta). Mateo's father passed away when he was just five years old, and Maricar raised and supported him on her own. Mateo is now employed and in love with his office mate, Zari (Miles Ocampo), who will be assigned to work in Singapore. Despite wanting to follow Zari, he is concerned about leaving

his mother alone. Mateo strives to find a good man to take care of Maricar, but her feelings are hurt. Will Mateo follow his heart and his dreams? Can he bear to leave his mother, who raised him with love and continues to care for him?

This project reunites Director Nuel Crisostomo Naval and screenwriter Mel Mendoza-Del Rosario, who contributed to the MMFF 2022 with Family Matters, which received numerous

FAMAS awards. The story is simple, yet they skillfully crafted the film in every scene. They captured the sentiments of the Filipino audience and balanced the emotional moments with delightful humor. There isn't much conflict since there's no antagonist, but the film portrays common and small things that disturb relationships: within the family, at work, with the beloved, and even within oneself. Alden and Sharon's

performances as mother and son come naturally, with their banter and exchange of words, convincingly portraying a family of just the two of them. Cuneta was, however, a bit overly dramatic in some scenes. The supporting actors, like Miles Ocampo, delivered restrained performances. The emotional music and witty heartfelt lines helped viewers immerse themselves in Maricar and Matty's world.

We've seen many mother and son stories, but in Family of Two, Maricar

isn't a meddling mother, and Matty isn't a spineless mama's boy. The film shows genuine care and love, readiness to forgive, to sacrifice, and to let go to allow a loved one to grow freely. It doesn't insist on seeking happiness and fulfillment from others but rather, as the saying goes, "in becoming the person you were meant to be." Perhaps, this is the deeper value of the film. It's true that we're commanded to love others, especially family and those close to us. However, the sacrifices and

love of the older generation are often overlooked by the younger ones. This film serves as a good reminder to express gratitude to those who guided and laid the foundation for us to be where we are now. It's also a significant challenge for those who have sacrificed for the sake of their families and loved ones to dream again and pursue what they have set aside. Here let us be reminded of the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar, "What you are is God's gift to you, what you become is your gift to God."

LISTEN ON

We're here to answer your questions about life, faith, and love. We'll explore a variety of topics, including our purpose, how to grow in our faith, or even finding true love.

ang daming tanong
 PODCAST

MADE FOR GREATNESS

The 31st CFC Singles for Christ International Conference



SARAH ABIGAIL HALAL
CONTRIBUTOR

THE 31ST CFC Singles for Christ International Conference was held last February 16-18 at the Lamberto Macias Sports and Cultural Center in Dumaguete, Negros Oriental. With the theme, **Made for Greatness**, inspired from the book of Isaiah 49:6b, **“I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth”**, the conference this year brought over **3,000 single men and women to a personal encounter and countless moments with Jesus.**

The event featured spiritually enriching activities, talks, breakout discussions, Eucharistic celebrations, confession, individual

counseling, and fellowship. This year, in a deliberate effort to share the gift of the SFC community with the Church, young Catholics from different parishes in the Diocese of Dumaguete were invited to join the Singles Night, originally known as Club Praise, where the delegates enjoyed music, games, food, and fellowship.

The conference began with Holy Eucharist celebrated by His Excellency Most Rev. Julito B. Cortes from the Diocese of Dumaguete. Bishop Cortes expressed his gratitude to SFC for gathering the youth to the conference. Bishop reminded everyone that “You are not just meant to be observers”, challenging everyone to “Do something good”

SFC ICON/ P4

Advance Party: The SFC Pre-ICon Adventure

THE CFC Singles for Christ (SFC) International Conference (ICon) held its Pre-ICon last February 13-15, 2024 in Dumaguete, Negros Oriental. Over 53 single men and women participated in a 3-day activity that allowed them to live out the different SFC identities, “I am a Missionary”, “I am a Catholic”, and “My Family is a Gift”.

Despite being strangers to each other, these single men and women sparked different conversations, sharing each other’s journeys and discovering that there were so many similarities in their interests and seasons. The program opened with worship led by Janry Lood, a chapter leader from CFC SFC Metro Manila Central B. Janry shared his struggles with finances when he was about to register

SFC PRE-ICON/ P3



SFC Pre-ICon joiners speak:

THE next Pre-International Conference event will be in Mindanao on February 2025. If one isn’t convinced yet about the joy this experience can bring, get to know more about the Pre-ICon experiences of some of the participants this year:



“As a first time Pre-ICON Joiner, it was heart warming and very intimate. I think I can’t imagine joining the ICON without the Pre-ICON starting this year.” — *Demavanessa S. Tampus, CFC SFC Leyte*

“In all honesty, I was having second thoughts about joining the pre-ICON 2024 because of the limited time that I have in the Philippines, but I’m beyond grateful I did. The 3-day experience was indeed life-changing and an ultimate recharge on my end. Meeting new friends, building relationships with my brothers and sisters in the community, and reliving servanthood through several activities while enjoying each other’s company made it all worthwhile. I’m looking forward to my next pre-icon journey!” — *J-san Orac Tubilla, CFC SFC San Jose Chapter, Negros Oriental*



“It was fun meeting with the brothers and sisters from different parts of the world sharing the same excitement whenever we are in the pre-icon. We do not have any idea what’s in store in the Pre-icon, but what is certain is that all if the activities are fun, meaningful, and full of blessings with the brothers and sisters in Christ. For me, the ICon would not be complete without the Pre-icon.” — *Myas Monteverde, CFC SFC Metro Manila Central A*

“Pre-icon was and is a family affair as I was able to bring my parents who are also SFC - Seniors for Christ. Among the highlights was the SFCs asking love advice from them given their 40 years of marriage. It was nice to connect and reconnect with brothers and sisters from all over the world, live out our advocacies through various activities, worship and travel with sibs, and ultimately build life-long friendships.” — *Richard Dean “Ardi” Basa, CFC SFC Benguet*



MISSION CORE TEACHING NIGHT

Fiducia Supplicans explained

THE MONTHLY teaching night of the Couples for Christ Mission Core, held on February 20, 2024, at Christ the King Parish in Green Meadows, focused on the Declaration “Fiducia Supplicans On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings,” which the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith issued on December 13, 2023. Rev. Fr. Joel Jason, CFC spiritual adviser, gave the talk, with the title “Fiducia Supplicans: Mercy and the Church’s Expression of Inclusivity.”

Fr. Joel began by showing a video of Pope Francis reading the Declaration, followed by



screenshots of the different reactions the document earned in various media. Pope Paul VI’s encyclical

MM MC TEACHING/ P3

CFC MM Central A Celebrates Unang Dekada



“FAMILIES ARE like branches of a tree. We grow in different directions. Yet our roots remain as one.”

This was the driving spirit behind the UNANG DEKADA Reunion of CFC Central A Sector, held on February 17, 2024 at the Wack-Wack subdivision Social Hall.

The sector leaders, headed by Leo and Owen Labrador, assembled a team to bring together under one roof all those who had taken their CLP

(Christian Life Program) and those who had served in the sector from 1981-1992.

It was a daunting task, using available means of communications (mobile messaging and digital platforms among others) to reach our brethren — some of whom have moved on to other faith communities, or have chosen to “lie-low”.

The team gathered information on the sector’s history, starting with its birth as an

CENTRAL A/ P3



DEAR CFC FAMILY...

By JOE YAMAMOTO

Family — a most precious gift

WHAT is “family”?

There are many definitions of family. Even the dictionary defines “family” in several ways –

“The traditional definition, which is a “fundamental social group in society typically consisting of one or two parents and their children;”

The extended family which includes many relatives connected through DNA;

The blended family that is formed as a result of marriage of two persons with children from a previous marriage.

Whichever definition one uses, it is clear that what makes up a “family” are the people themselves. Thus the modern definition of “family” is “two or more people who share goals and values, have long-term commitments to one another and commonly reside in the same dwelling”.

Couples for Christ has recognized that “family” is indeed evolving and, over the years, has shifted its focus from nurturing the relationship between only husband and wife to include all relatives and even those in society who need the kind of love and care that only family can give.

It is also clear that today, whatever definition one adopts, the family is under attack. Common law relationships are prevalent; teenage marriage and pregnancies occur more frequently now than ever before (data from 2019 shows an average of 171 live births daily to minors aged 10-19); married couples give up on each other too easily and resort to legal separation and even divorce (for those who can afford to get it abroad); and there are increasing incidences of mental health concerns (depression, anxiety) and suicide.

CFC has been swift to respond to this challenge, gaining insight from papal teachings and call to new evangelization that aims to restore God’s plan for marriage and the family. Popes from St. John Paul II to our present Pope

Francis have emphasized the importance of family as the hope and the solution for society’s ills.

The great St John Paul II contributed immensely to the growth in breadth and depth of the teachings of the Catholic Church on the family. One of the most insightful and timely of his works is the post-synodal apostolic exhortation on the families written by him and promulgated on Nov 22, 1981. *Familiaris Consortio* (The Fellowship of the Family) has a powerful subtitle: **On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World.**

St. John Paul II extols the family as front and center in the work of Evangelization and thus participates in the salvific mission of Jesus—“the future of the world and of the Church pass by way of the family”. This document explicitly identifies the family as both the ‘first and vital cell of society’ and as the cradle of faith.

The core message of this papal exhortation is that all families would hold fast to the beautiful and salvific witness that the sacrament of marriage is purposed to be for the world. In essence, marriage is a ‘memorial, actuation and prophecy’. As a memorial, husband and wife, in the sacrament of marriage, have the honor and purpose of memorializing the magnificent labors of Christ by their daily humble and selfless sacrifice in caring for their offspring. As actuation, they are called to be exemplars of Christ’s love and forgiveness to one another and their children throughout their entire lives. As prophecy, they have the honorable task of embodying and revealing, with reverence and commitment to one another and their offspring, that Christ is the way, truth and light and through Him alone can one receive eternal communion with God.

The faithful, as individual families or as groups or communities, are expected and

encouraged to flesh out the noble aspirations of the writings of St. John Paul II. The question is always how and when. Couples for Christ as a community responded to the call and challenge by rolling out for its members the Theology of the Body program and as part of an evolutionary process, fleshing out the more tangible expression by forming the Family is a Gift program.

Initially, Family is a Gift began as an internal advocacy intended for the benefit of the members. In the course of the enthusiasm generated by its relevance and timeliness, Couples for Christ, recognizing its role in animating the social fabric of families and communities, presented the program to the bishops and priests. FIG finally was received in the plenary session of the CBCP last January 29, 2024.

Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium* puts it in strong terms—“Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are “disciples” and “missionaries,” but rather that we are always “missionary disciples”. We are all obliged, by virtue of our being missionary disciples, to proclaim the love of God. Again, Pope Francis emphasizes that “Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love.”

How does Family is a Gift do this?

First, FIG advocates Christian values. CFC is pro-God, pro-Family; pro-Life and pro-Poor. FIG emphasizes that families will prosper if Christ is at the center of family life, if the parents model themselves after Joseph and Mary, if the children practice the kind of obedience and humility that Jesus himself modeled; if the family is an example of what Christian mercy and compassion should be.

In these modern times, FIG has recognized the value of social media and has embarked on campaigns to promote the value of family. We started by using busy EDSA as a platform for

posters promoting the beauty of parenthood and of married life. We even used city buses to carry these posters, bringing the message to all corners of Luzon. We used social media—FaceBook, YouTube and other platforms—to host talkshows and promote events.

FIG visited schools to give talks to the students, the parents and the teachers, extolling the beauty of love and unity in the home and among family members. This has had tremendous success and FIG has received many requests to visit even more schools.

Second, FIG aims to equip couples and family members to build strong marriages and families. FIG is now active in parishes, providing formation sessions for the youth, singles, and couples in the parishes using the auspices and manpower of the programs under it—the Family Ministries, the Seniors Program and the Young Couples Program. FIG has also offered its assistance to parishes in providing pre- and post-Cana sessions.

FIG continues to harness the experience of experts in such specialized topics as Mental Health issues, Same-Sex Attraction, Families with OFWs, Theology of the Body, and other issues and challenges faced by the young, the singles and married couples. FIG’s involvement in and assistance to parishes and schools are meant simply to propagate awareness of the beauty of family. There is no hard-selling of membership in CFC or recruitment to the Christian Life Program. If we gain members, then we praise God. If not, then we still praise God because we have fulfilled our mission—to proclaim the message that the Christian family is the hope of society.

FIG also hopes to provide an environment of mutual support and caring to groups such as the LBGTQ community and live-in couples through the Accompaniment Program. The program aims to simply show that rather than being shunned and judged, these groups are worthy of caring from society and of love from God.

The family is indeed a precious gift from our God. Having received this gift, we are now called to give it back to the Church and to the world as our offering of love.



AQUILA AND PRISCILLA

By JUN & JEAN URIARTE

Love is kind 1 Corinthians 13:4

ONE evening of 1965, while I was at my study desk at the faculty dormitory of U.P. Los Banos where I taught for a year before moving to U.P. Diliman, I wrote this poem, *Ode to the West Wind*, while watching the wind blow outside and thinking about Jean who was a junior student at U.P. Diliman in Quezon City. Jean’s full name is Genevieve. I was just 20 and Jean was 19.

Ode to the West Wind

Go where my Jean’s abiding.
Evanescence but there attend.
Never cease, without stopping,
Ever blowing to her I send.
Verdant vicinage you’ll find,
In the place where lives my love.
Enter her room, embrace her heart.
Visit her place, and tell her that
Ever more, forever more, it is her
I’ll always love.

In 2018, we celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary and renewed our marriage vows at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. Then on our 55th anniversary in 2023, we renewed our vows at the Basilica of Our Lady of La Salette located at the top of the Alps in France.

As we celebrate Valentine’s Day this month of February 2024, we ponder on the words of St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians: “*Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, love is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).*”



SERVING GOD'S SERVANTS

By ARNEL SANTOS

The gift of gathering

THE OXFORD Dictionary defines “gathering” as an assembly or meeting, especially a social or festive one or one held for a specific purpose.”

As a community, Couples for Christ is blessed to be able to gather. In just the first two months of the year, CFC has seen brethren gather in joy and love in many activities.

On January 20, 2024, 14,000 CFC leaders gathered at the CFC “BE A SERVANT AND A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS” International Leaders Conference, at the SMX Convention Center, MOA, Pasay City. Leaders from the Luzon and Visayas Mission attended the morning session. Those from the Metro Manila, Mindanao, and International Missions attended the afternoon session. There were 123 online attendees at these two sessions.

A week after, or on January 25 to 28, 2,000 top leaders gathered for a three-day retreat

educated our children sending them to the best schools. We refused to abort our middle child who was born blind, mute and deaf, autistic, with tetralogy of Fallot resulting from German measles contracted by Jean while she was pregnant. We cared for him until the Lord took him back at the age of 24. So, with God’s grace, we think we have fulfilled our procreative duty.

The unitive aspect had its ups and downs during the initial years, but again, with God’s grace, we were invited to join the CFC community in 1992, and this special grace has kept us faithful to our unitive responsibility.

With only a few more years ahead of us, we wonder if, at the end of our earthly pilgrimage, we can say like St. Paul: I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge will award to me on that day (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

It is for this reason that during this month of February, the month during which we celebrate love, we find joy and hope in the teaching of St. Thérèse of Lisieux who was declared Doctor of the Church by Pope John Paul II on 19 October 1997. The Holy Father said, “We can rightly recognize in the Saint of Lisieux the charism of a Doctor of the Church, because of the gift of the Holy Spirit she received for living and expressing her experience of faith, and because of her particular understanding of the mystery of Christ.”

The common Church teaching is that purgatory can hardly be avoided. When Therese learned that the novices felt that they would probably have to expect to be in purgatory, she corrected them saying: “Oh! How you grieve me! You do a great injury to God in believing you’re going to purgatory. When we love, we can’t go there.”

St. Therese believes that we need a more positive image of God. God is more Father than Judge. Once Therese was reproached by her sub-prioress, Sr. Marie Febronie, who considered Therese’s belief presumptuous. She had heard that Therese encouraged

or have scheduled these gatherings to happen during the first half of the year.

In March, CFC-SOLD will gather. In May, CFC-HOLD will gather. By June, all of CFC will again gather for the 43rd CFC Anniversary. Then it will be the time to gather the CFC-Youth for Christ and the CFC-Kids for Christ for their leaders’ conferences. The final major gathering will be the CFC-ANCOP annual Global Walk.

The highlight in all these CFC big gatherings is the celebration of daily Masses preceded by the praying of Holy Rosary.

The same CFC leaders who attended these huge gatherings also gather every week for small group meetings called the CFC Household — to worship, reflect on the Word of God, share about each other’s life journeys, and have fellowship with one another. They also gather twice a month for the Mission Core Assemblies/ chapter assemblies and the monthly teachings.

It is in these gatherings that the Word of God permeates our lives. It is in these gatherings that we realize our weaknesses and crave nourishment in our individual and family life. The sacred spaces created by the gathering of people longing to encounter God open our hearts to receive healing and strength.

the novices to believe that they could go straight to heaven. St. Therese tried lovingly to explain to Sr. Febronie her point of view but Sr. Febronie clung to her belief. Therese finally responded, “My sister, if you look for the justice of God you will get it. The soul will receive from God exactly what she desires.”

In January 1892, Sr. Febronie died. Three months later Therese had a dream which she related to her Mother Prioress: “O my Mother, Sr. Febronie came to me last night and asked that we should pray for her. She is in purgatory, because she had trusted too little in the mercy of the good Lord. It seemed she wanted to say, ‘You were right. I am now delivered up to the full justice of God, but it is my fault. If I had listened to you, I would not be here now.’”

St. Therese states that purgatory has become a rule rather than the exception. God does not wish for us to need purgatory. God does not put us here on earth, where we are tested and are suffering after the fall, only to let us suffer again in purgatory. Everyone receives enough graces to go straight to God after passing the trials on earth. The rule is to go straight to heaven; the exception is to pass through purgatory. To say that purgatory is inevitable is a grave error. God does not really want purgatory. In this regard, the mystics unanimously affirm that the least suffering in purgatory is much greater than the greatest suffering on earth. The reason for this is that once in purgatory, one does not go through the time of God’s Mercy but of God’s Justice.

Purgatory is a waste of time. St. Therese says, “I know that of myself I would not merit even to enter that place of expiation since only holy souls can have an entrance there. But I also know that the Fire of Love is more sanctifying than the Fire of Purgatory. I know that Jesus cannot desire useless sufferings for us and that he would not inspire the longings I feel unless he wanted to grant them.”

The question of whether heaven will follow right after death is a question of trust. God does not need our merits in order to take us straight to heaven, but He needs all our trust. There is no trust without perfect love; and there is no love without trust. This is what St. John said in his first letter: “In this is love brought to perfection among us, that we have confidence (trust) on the day of judgment because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment, and so one who fears is not yet perfect in love (1 John 4:17-18).

So, husband love your wife; wife respect your husband (Ephesians 5:25,33). Let us all love one another. For God is love. And love is kind.

Indeed, gathering is a gift.

There is however a danger when one becomes used to gathering. Dietrich Boenhoffer puts it this way—

“It is true, of course, that what is an unspeakable gift of God for the lonely individual is easily disregarded and trodden underfoot by those who have the gift every day. It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed.”

To avoid this danger, he says: “Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God’s grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.”

Let us thank the Lord for the gift of gathering in CFC, especially in this season of Lent, when we examine our life — our family life most importantly. Let all gatherings make our hearts open to being made servant and light to our family, servant and light to all nations.

CFC OIKOS now implemented in CFC Macau

CFC OIKOS is a term that encompasses the idea of taking care of our environment and ensuring its well-being for current and future generations. OIKOS represents the Greek word for “household,” suggesting that the Earth is our shared home that we must protect and nurture.

Caring for the environment involves a range of actions, from reducing waste and conserving resources to supporting sustainable practices and advocating for policies that prioritize environmental protection. It also includes raising awareness about the impact of human activities on the planet and promoting eco-friendly habits. By embracing the principles of CFC SOCDEV OIKOS, everyone can contribute to a healthier, more sustainable planet for all living beings.

During the CFC 43rd Anniversary, the Declaration of Climate Emergency of

Couples for Christ was signed by CFC Chairman/ President Jose Yamamoto on behalf of the CFC community, with the commitment to “be caring stewards of what the Lord has given us and to take the appropriate steps to ensure that we leave behind a legacy of a beautiful and clean world to those who will come after us.”

CFC must take to heart this commitment in response to Pope Francis’ call to the massive endeavor to preserve the Earth, everyone’s common home.

In response, CFC Macau implemented one OIKOS project which is organic gardening, spearheaded by Anie Logronio, supported by Dante and Donna Quejano, Sonny and Alma Sta. Ana, and Helen Remotigue. In organic gardening, plants are cultivated using natural methods, without synthetic chemicals or pesticides. Organic gardening promotes biodiversity, soil health, and sustainable food production. Growing food organically reduces the carbon footprint, supports

local ecosystems, and reduces water pollution. It is aligned with the principles of CFC SOCDEV OIKOS, emphasizing the importance of sustainable living and environmental stewardship. By engaging in organic gardening, the community actively contributes to environmental conservation efforts and promotes a more eco-friendly way of living. This is one way CFC Macau fosters a sense of responsibility towards the planet. Organic gardening is a practical and impactful way to care for the environment and create a greener, more sustainable future for all.

The harvest of this endeavor is shared with the CFC Macau brethren who cook the harvested vegetables and serve the dishes during CFC events like the General Prayer Assembly and household prayer meetings. In addition, any excess produce is shared with neighbors. **(Sonny and Alma Sta. Ana, CFC OIKOS Luzon Island & CFC Macau Country Coordinators)**

CENTRAL A/ P1

outreach of Ligaya ng Panginoon (LNP), with the establishment of its first chapter (then headed by Rouquel and Nina Ponte) at the St. John the Baptist (Pinaglabanan) parish, designated as NORTH 4.

James & Malou Tan had also held strategic CLPs in different homes to establish CFC in the Filipino-Chinese community, which eventually became the Mary the Queen (MTQ) Chapter or NORTH 17.

The NORTH 7 (Pasig) group, headed by Toto and Delia dela Cruz spearheaded the first Mandaluyong CLP in San Felipe Neri, together with Joe and Babylou Tale, who had taken their own CLP in Makati.

The process of tracing the “family tree” of what is now known as Central A (San Juan-Mandaluyong) sector, with its 20 chapters, gave the organizers a greater sense of “commissioning” — realizing the extent and reach of its mission areas in the provinces, the Middle East and Europe. How God uses imperfect people to perfect His plan!

The UNANG DEKADA Reunion started with

a welcome message by Leo Labrador and a video message from the U.S. by Joe and Babylou Tale. Tynee Anden, together with the “original worship” leaders Egay Peña Edgar Talavera, Butch and Mercy Angeles, led everyone into powerful worship with the songs of yore — among them “Blessing & Glory, Great and Wonderful and Hiney Matov”. Charlie Reyes led the thanksgiving prayer before the meal. Jun Cawad, serenaded the assembly while they ate a sumptuous lunch. Alex Escucha later expounded on the history of the sector. Rouquel Ponte led the day’s closing prayer.

It was day filled with sharing of memories, much laughter, photo opportunities and honoring of those who pioneered missions. Everyone — all 147 attendees — went home with full hearts, tummies and spirits, and with renewed promises of staying connected to each other.

No matter the passage of time and where destiny brought everyone, we are after all brothers and sisters in Christ... and Family is a Gift! **(KT Abaña)**

SFC PRE-ICON/ P1

for the conference. Filled with God’s providence, he was able to register in time for the conference and opened the series of activities with a grateful heart through his worship.

Next was a team building activity that further strengthened the bond of the participants. The teams went around Dumaguete City, visiting museums and getting to know the culture and history of the place. One notable experience was the visit to the National Museum and seeing an award-winning piece by National Artist, Jana Jumalon, whom they later met in person on the last leg of the pre-Icon.

Part of the pastoral fundamentals of the pre-Icon were the sessions that helped make the journey of living out the SFC identities more personal. Jefferson Concepcion, CFC SFC full-time pastoral worker, led the first session and shared his joys in serving the ministry of Singles for Christ. “Do not be afraid to grow and go out by sharing the joy”, said Jeff.

The week of Pre-Icon was extra special for the participants since the Wednesday of that week was

both Valentine’s Day and Ash Wednesday. The day started with a solemn celebration of the Eucharist at the Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Monastery, followed by an encounter with seminarians from St. Joseph College Seminary in Sibulan that gave the participants an appreciation of this particular vocation opportunity. The second pastoral activity was given by Kathleen Garcia, CFC SFC full-time pastoral worker. Kathleen shared her different personal advocacies which led her to deeply reflect on the calling of the Lord and eventually commit to serve the Lord full-time in SFC. The teams were then dispersed to different advocacy activities such as coral reef house-making, tree planting, hospital and prison visits and an afternoon at a shelter for the vulnerable.

Later that afternoon, the participants were divided into male and female groups. The male participants spent an afternoon visiting persons deprived of liberty in prison where they shared the gift of praise and worship, taught them praise songs, and spent time with them. The females were in two different groups — the hospital visit team

and the team that spent an afternoon with the shelter for the vulnerable. All teams made sure that the time spent in these visits were both prayerful and intentional. The teams prayed over the individuals they encountered in the prison, hospital, and shelter. In the evening, the team wrapped up the day with a very special Valentine’s dinner with games, sharing and performances.

On the last day of the Pre-Icon, the participants went around the towns of Valencia and Sibulan while enjoying the sites, the sceneries, and of course, the pride of Negros Oriental, good food! The participants also had a pottery session with National Artist, Jana Jumalon at the Mugna Gallery in Valencia. It was one therapeutical afternoon that led all of the participants to fall MUDly in love with local art, pun intended!

The week ended with a praise fest led by Kurt Navarra, CFC lay missionary from DM Compound in Caloocan. As the team sang songs of praise in the middle of the farm fields, watching the sunset, they were no longer strangers but friends turned to family. **(S.A. Halal)**

MC TEACHING NIGHT/ P1

letter *Humanae Vitae* similarly earned a firestorm of reactions when it was released in 1968, recalled Fr. Joel, adding that the reactions were mostly against it. His talk, he said, would focus on three questions: What is the document really saying? Why is it controversial? Where do we go from here?

What the Declaration says

While *Fiducia Supplicans* has been taken by some as signifying that the Church now blesses same-sex attraction or union, the Declaration is rather “the Church’s attempt to live out synodality,” that is, “the Church walking together with the people.” It is not so much about same-sex attraction or relationships but about the meaning of pastoral blessings, touching, in particular, on couples in irregular relationships: those divorced and remarried, live-in partners, couples in same-sex relationships, and polyamorous arrangements.

Upon its release, *Fiducia Supplicans* stirred panic among conservatives, with some predicting “the end of the Church” and even provoking accusations of heresy against Pope Francis. African bishops were quick to declare that there would be no blessings for homosexual couples in the African churches. On the other hand, the right-wing and liberals went manic, excited at the chance to bless, in particular, couples in same-sex relationships.

According to Fr. Joel, rather than with panic or mania, we should react as mystics, that is, as people who listen, pray, and discern. Fr. Joel said he went before the Blessed Sacrament and there read the Declaration to reflect on what it truly meant. The teaching has not changed, he stressed. “The principle remains. The Gospel is meant to change man, not for man to change the Gospel to suit his actions,” and the Church will not say or do anything that will oppose the Spirit of God. Further, “marriage and its definition has not changed.” *Fiducia Supplicans*, said Fr. Joel, “is not about changing our understanding of marriage.” Rather, it is “about broadening our understanding of blessings.”

Liturgical versus Pastoral Blessing

The Declaration clarifies the meaning of the various blessings. As explained by Fr. Joel, there are three types of blessing: a blessing that descends, a blessing that ascends, and a blessing that extends.

The Aaronic blessing (Numbers 6:23–27) is an example of the first type of blessing, which “...has a ‘descending’ character since it represents the invocation of a blessing that descends from God upon man: It is one of the oldest texts of divine blessing” (FS 15). The second type of blessing is “... that which ‘ascends’ from earth to heaven, toward God. Blessing in this sense amounts to praising, celebrating, and thanking God for his mercy and his faithfulness...” (FS 15), as in Psalm 103:1. The third type of blessing extends God’s power to bless, so to speak: “... God communicates to his Church the power to bless. Granted by God to human beings and bestowed by them on their neighbors, the blessing is transformed into inclusion, solidarity, and peacemaking...” (FS 19).

According to Fr. Joel, extending blessings come in two forms: liturgical and pastoral. Liturgical blessings, such as the sacraments, are much like formal endorsements, citing something as worthy of emulation. As such, there are stringent requirements for liturgical blessings. “From a strictly liturgical point of view, a blessing requires that what is blessed be conformed to God’s will, as expressed in the teachings of the Church” (FS 9). Further, “...when a blessing is invoked on certain human relationships by a special liturgical rite, it is necessary that what is blessed corresponds with God’s designs written in creation and fully revealed by Christ the Lord” (FS 11).

In contrast, pastoral blessings are informal, such as those given by a priest when someone spontaneously asks for a specific blessing. “A blessing can also be a means of invocation of Divine assistance for thanksgiving, or when one is weak, afraid, lost, in error, in sin, and in need of redirection and encouragement for conversion and perseverance in the Christian life,” Fr. Joel explained. “In this type of pastoral blessing,” he added, “a strict scrutiny of the person’s moral and doctrinal rectitude is not absolutely necessary,” and “we proclaim that no one who wants to come to God will be turned away.” Thus, a pastoral blessing does not require those seeking it to have “prior moral perfection” (FS 25). The priest blesses “the sinner, not the sin,” so that “God’s grace can touch and perfect whatever is good in that person” and, ultimately, so that the person may draw closer to God. Hence, even if the person’s life is not perfect, he or she can still receive the blessing.

The Person, Not the Union

Fr. Joel clarified: *Fiducia Supplicans* refers to pastoral, not liturgical, blessings. The point of confusion may have stemmed from the terminology used in Chapter III of the Declaration: “Blessings of Couples in Irregular Situations and of Couples of the Same Sex.” Fr. Joel surmised, because the word “couples” implies union.

Nevertheless, the Declaration clearly states: “within the horizon outlined here is the possibility of blessings for couples in irregular situations and for couples of the same sex, the form of which should not be fixed ritually by ecclesial authorities to avoid producing confusion with the blessing proper to the Sacrament of Marriage...” (FS 31). In this case, Fr. Joel emphasized, the blessing is “for the person, not the union.”

Having said thus, Fr. Joel stated that a priest can refuse to give the pastoral blessing, or to give the blessing publicly, to couples in irregular relationships or couples of the same sex, for “when it comes to blessings, the Church has the right and the duty to avoid any rite that might contradict this conviction or lead to confusion” (FS 5). As Pope Francis explained, this is to avoid that “something that is not marriage is being recognized as marriage.” Hence, “...rites and prayers that could create confusion between what constitutes marriage—which is the “exclusive, stable, and indissoluble union between a man and a woman, naturally open to the generation of children”—and what contradicts it are inadmissible. This conviction is grounded in the perennial Catholic doctrine of marriage; it is only in this context that sexual relations find their natural, proper, and fully human meaning. The Church’s doctrine on this point remains firm” (FS 4).

Simple, Shrouded, and Spontaneous

The pastoral blessing should therefore be simple, shrouded, and spontaneous. It should neither be formal nor official, explained Fr. Joel. Rather, a simple prayer will do, preferably in private, so as to avoid the impression of a public endorsement. It would be best for the priest to talk privately to the person seeking the blessing, to journey with that person toward the ultimate goal of bringing him or her closer to the Gospel.

Fr. Joel cautioned: In blessing married couples during the mass, which is sometimes done during special occasions, the priest should be careful to use clear and correct terminology; for example, “we call on couples married in Church to come forward for the blessing of their sacramental marriage.” This is to avoid inadvertently blessing the union of couples in irregular relationships and couples of the same sex, and thus giving a wrong impression of Church endorsement of such unions.

“God never turns away anyone who approaches him! Ultimately, a blessing offers people a means to increase their trust in God. The request for a blessing thus expresses and nurtures openness to the transcendence, mercy, and closeness to God in a thousand concrete circumstances of life, which is no small thing in the world in which we live. It is a seed of the Holy Spirit that must be nurtured, not hindered” (FS 33).

“Everyone is welcome in the Church but,” Fr. Joel emphasized, “not on their terms but on the terms of the Gospel.” He added that love should always be coupled with truth. “Love without truth is sentimentality. Truth without love is tyranny.” Thus, truth should be given in a pastoral way, with gentleness and humility (1 Peter 3:15-16). We should “communicate truth in a spirit of charity.”

Moving Forward

In his presentation of *Fiducia Supplicans*, Victor Manuel Card. Fernández, Prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, clearly stated that the Declaration “... remains firm on the traditional doctrine of the Church about marriage, not allowing any type of liturgical rite or blessing similar to the liturgical rite that can create confusion. The value of this document, however, is that it offers a specific and innovative contribution to the pastoral meaning of blessings.” Hence, *Fiducia Supplicans* is not about changing the Church’s stance on marriage and same-sex unions but about expanding our understanding of blessings.

According to Fr. Joel, if there is one key takeaway from his talk, it is this: “Therefore, the blessing is for the person, not the union.” He urged those in attendance to read and reflect on the document, to share with others what they have learned, and to continue to proclaim God’s vision for marriage and the family.

He admitted that the blessing can be abused and weaponized by enemies of the Church, but then again, that is true for everything else, for example, communion. Even so, the possibility of abuse does not stop priests from giving communion. Neither should it paralyze the Church from giving blessings. The grace of God, received through such blessings, is needed so that the initial promptings of grace can grow, especially among new and potential converts.

As a final word, Fr. Joel honored Couples for Christ for the work it does for the family, as well as its thirst for learning, adding that in CFC, the Church is shown as the body of Christ. You are “the light of the world and the salt of the earth,” he declared, and as a final encouragement: “Your best ability is your availability. Make yourself available, and God will make you able.” **(Richie Tolentino)**



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The CFC SFC Global Leaders' Summit is back!



AFTER six years, the highly anticipated CFC-Singles for Christ Global Leaders' Summit finally took place at Sea Dream Resort, Dauin Negros Oriental from February 19 to 21, 2024. The event was well-attended by top leaders of CFC-Singles for Christ, including representatives from 12 countries in the International Missions, 8 sectors from Metro Manila Missions, and 20 provinces from the Philippine Missions.

The three-day summit commenced with daily Eucharistic celebrations led by Fr. Hendrix Alar, the CFC Negros Oriental Spiritual Adviser. The summit featured two sessions centered around this year's CFC Theme and the anchor verse from Isaiah 49:6.

The first session, conducted by Er Abringe, a fulltime pastoral worker of CFC-SFC, focused on "Stepping into the Light". As leaders of the ministry, it is their call to illuminate the current landscape and realities

faced by singles today. Day two was dedicated to focused group discussions, with the morning sessions addressing each area's concerns, challenges, best practices in evangelization, formation, and generosity. Afternoon discussions revolved around supporting singles as the next generation of the Church, society, and CFC.

The day concluded with an acoustic night fellowship, providing delegates with an opportunity to enjoy each other's company. The last day of the summit was dedicated to the send-off of delegates via a closing session that talked about "Radiating God's Light through Servanthood and Accountability" led by Manny Panagsagan, the CFC Family Ministries Head.

The summit ended with a praisefest led by Ace Lu, SFC International Coordinator, with a heartwarming washing of the feet of the leaders as a concrete act of love, servanthood, and accountability to one another. **(Kath Garcia)**

CFC Seniors Program: Co.MISSION.ed by Christ

THE CFC Seniors Program gathered at the Almont Inland Resort in Butuan City from February 23 to 24, 2024, for the annual CFC Seniors National Conference. Eager to come together once again after the first face to face Conference in Pampanga last year, the CFC Seniors, who came from Metro Manila, Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao, gathered at the Timber City of the South to listen to Board of Elders members George Campos and Bong Arjonillo, IC member Lito Tayag, and CFC Servants of the Lord International Coordinator Willie Padida.

All the speakers had a central message — even though they are seniors, they can do much more.

The spirit-filled conference left a lasting impact on the CFC seniors. Despite the inevitable realities and trials of their twilight years, they recognize the blessing of being able to continue the mission. Seniors carry with them a wealth of wisdom that the youth do not yet possess, and it is the seniors' mission to serve as beacons of light, and serve despite challenges and limitations.

The call to be a "servant and a light to the nations" is a resounding mission. Therefore, in God, the CFC Seniors are all comMISSIONed.



First MM alumni homecoming preps next ANCOP ambassadors



THE BEST endorsers of any product are obviously those who have used it—and loved it! This is exactly the thinking behind CFC ANCOP's decision to organize its first ANCOP Alumni Metro Manila Homecoming on February 3 at the Nativity of the Lord Parish Church, Quezon City.

150 ANCOP alumni, Program Implementation Team members (PITs), and area leaders attended the event, which featured the induction of Metro Manila alumni officers and oath-taking of members; awarding of CFC ANCOP sashes to the

graduates with Latin Honors; and personal testimonials from several alumni.

Next-gen ANCOP ambassadors

"It was an overwhelmingly positive reaction from the alumni and other guests as they were recognized for all their efforts and achievements. The newly-elected Metro Manila CFC ANCOP officers will be the core group that will lead the alumni under their care to be 'ambassadors of ANCOP,'" explained CFC ANCOP Alumni Association Coordinator Ditas Rafael in an interview.

According to her, the mission of ANCOP in the lives of its beneficiaries extends even beyond sponsored students' college graduation. The best "product" ANCOP offers is a deep and growing relationship with God, which will also be the program's main goal. "[The program is about] evangelization, leading the ANCOP scholar alumni to continue developing a relationship with God," the better half of

ANCOP Executive Director Boyet Rafael added. The ultimate hope is that all ANCOP alumni will eventually become active supporters and ambassadors of the foundation who will share their time, talent, and treasure with others whose plight they understand so well.

Giving back

ANCOP alumnus from South A Henry Kevin Mendoza, who now works as a financial management specialist, could only describe the program as "essential." "Some of us are no longer

active in the community after college. This program will help us to stay connected to the community that helped us to graduate and [help us] give back in any service that we can offer or share," he explained. Mendoza, who started working at age ten just to help ease his family's financial burdens, added that ANCOP alumni do not just owe a debt of gratitude to the community but that their giving back is "the Lord's will so that more people can be helped."

The former Star FM radio DJ hopes the program can organize monthly gatherings for the ANCOP alumni, especially targeting the inactive ones, and hold a mass Christian Life Program (CLP) for those who have yet to transition to CFC – Singles for Christ. Mendoza also hopes the program could address the alumni's professional needs by setting up job fairs.

Networks, workshops, and more

For KT Abañó, also part of the ANCOP Alumni Program team, being part of the alumni's lives, not just while they are studying, is part of being in the community. She said, "ANCOP is part of CFC and as such, is holistic in nature. Their *titos* and *titas* (uncles and aunts), *kuyas*, and *ates* (elder siblings) are available to give them advice and support when needed because the blessings don't stop after their graduation, and that connections, networks, teachings, and training they may need [are all here]," she noted.

Abañó shared that the program's upcoming activities include training and workshops on goal-setting and planning, financial management, and entrepreneurial support.

Overall, the homecoming was a success. "The atmosphere was very lively and engaging...That's how I felt; other participants felt the same way. Most of them were wearing smiles after the event, which indicates that it had been a good program," observed Mendoza, who became an ANCOP scholar while taking up communication arts at STI College, Las Piñas. **(N. Delacruz)**

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and beautiful. Create something that will move the people to love and serve Christ."

The welcome festivities continued with local cultural performances, a message from Hon. Manuel "Chaco" Sagarbarria, Governor of Negros Oriental, and an official welcome from the CFC community of Negros Oriental, led by Provincial Area Director, Emet Busmeo. CFC International Council member Bboy Arguelles and his wife Rachel officially opened the conference with a message about giving and receiving.

Evan Fucal, a CFC lay missionary led the first session, urging the delegates to consistently choose Christ's light by living in truth, harmony, and gratitude. Towards the end of the segment, Evan hyped everyone to

dance along with their phone lights while the music ministry sang "O Mag-Hari Ka" and ended the segment with the lines "You are Praiseworthy oh my Lord". Indeed, the opening session was all about praising our King. The celebration continued with a night of fashion, music and endless dancing in the Singles Night.

The conference sessions the following day were all about darkness. Geneveve Rubio, shared that even in broad daylight, darkness can occur. She reminded the delegates of God's shining faithfulness in the midst of darkness. "In the midst of darkness, even one tiny light can change everything", said Gen as she exhorted everyone about the change we can do as children of the light. Sharers Joy Magboo, Sidh Ursua, and DeeJay Custodio spoke about seeing the light in their

trying times of darkness and being a vessel of that light as they lived their lives. The session ended with adoration and the celebration of the Holy Eucharist by Rev. Fr. Ramonito Maata, Head of Social Communications Ministry, Diocese of Dumaguete. In his homily, Fr. Ramon reminded the participants that "It is only when Christ shines in us that we can be a light to the nations so that salvation may be proclaimed".

The participants were then dispersed to three different venues for simultaneous sessions with Couple Coordinators. CFC SFC Couple Coordinator for Metro Manila West B, Matt and Hazel Barba, led the session with the men and the women respectively, while Rey Reyes, a member of the CFC International Council, gave the

session for the Couple Coordinators.

Goi Villegas, a CFC lay missionary assigned in Rome, led the third session where he challenged the delegates to follow Jesus' humility and selflessness. "In a generation that puts itself first and competes to be number one, we are called to be an image of Jesus. We are called to emulate His humility and selflessness". He invited everyone to stand firm and declare that we will win the world by #WinningTheJesusWay.

The conference ended, as is traditional, with Holy Mass. Mass celebrator Most Rev. Rex Alarcon, Bishop of the Diocese of Daet, Camarines Norte, in his homily, reminded the youth that "Greatness is when we are able to give our lives in the example of Jesus. Be the Light, remain in the light, and spread the light!".

Vince Saplot, SFC

International Core member, asked everyone to respond to God's call to live a life of greatness by being servant and light to all nations. Vince enjoined everyone to practice the gift of honoring and affirming one another, recognizing each other's strengths to shine like lights to the nations. He ended his session by encouraging the delegates to live out God's greatness through the service that they have in the community.

The festive event ended with a powerful praise fest. The 3000 delegates left the venue with a renewed sense of mission and hearts full of peace, convicted that God's greatness is truly alive in the lives of single men and women of the Church.

The next SFC ICON next year will be on February 14-16, in the province of Bukidnon, and on 2026 in Indonesia.

