

# Monitor

PROTAGONIST OF TRUTH, PROMOTER OF PEACE

## Major superiors warn vs 'deceptive' cha-cha

By ROY LAGARDE

**THE association of the country's major superiors has joined the growing chorus against plans to change the Philippine charter, supposedly to foster foreign investment.**

The Conference of Major Superiors in the Philippines (CMSP) has expressed deep concern over the "covert and deceptive" manner in which efforts for charter change have been pursued.

"When done in darkness, it is likely that there are other interests

and agendas behind this action," the CMSP said in a statement.

The Marcos government's allies in Congress said the proposed amendment of the 1987 Constitution covers only economic provisions.

President Ferdinand Marcos Jr himself insisted that the administration only supports an economic charter change, but various groups suspect its political provisions could also be changed.

"We then have to be alert and careful with the so-called 'economic reforms' for our lawmakers may introduce self-serving 'political changes' as part

of the amendments,"

CSMP said.

While the Constitution can be amended to respond to the present needs, it said that the process must involve broad consultation, with a "bottom-up approach".

The church superiors emphasized their desire for a better society, "but not at the expense of the poor and the environment."

They called on the government to address the more pressing concerns of the country, such as poverty, landlessness, labor issues, threats to national sovereignty, environmental destruction, among others.

"At the moment, we believe that the Constitution is not the problem but poor governance and systemic corruption," they said.

"We call on the people of the light to expose the greed and lust for power that may have motivated this feigned people's initiative for Cha-cha," they added.

In January, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines also warned the faithful against falling for a "deceptive" signature drive to amend the Constitution.

In a statement, the bishops said that self-interested politicians were out to exploit the nation through

such a political exercise.

CMSP is a joint forum of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men in the Philippines and the Conference of Major Superiors of Women in the Philippines.

Founded in 1972, CMSP was formerly known as the Association of Major

Religious Superiors in the Philippines or AMRSP.

The organization, consisting of over 360 congregations, played a crucial role during the Martial Law years, and provided sanctuaries to countless human rights victims in its seminaries and convents.

## Pope: 'I'm not considering resigning but would be 'bishop emeritus of Rome'

By VATICAN NEWS

THE Italian newspaper "Corriere della Sera" releases several passages from Pope Francis' autobiographical book entitled "Life. My Story in History," written with Vatican journalist Fabio Marchese Ragona

In the passages released on March 15, the Pope clarified that were he to resign, he would not choose to be called "Pope Emeritus" but simply "Bishop Emeritus of Rome."

In that case, he would live in the Basilica of St. Mary Major "to return to being a confessor and bring communion to the sick."

The Pope clarified this possible scenario in case of his resignation, which, however, he emphasized, "is a distant hypothesis" because there are no "so serious reasons" to consider this possibility, which he said he never considers, "despite moments of difficulty."

There are no "conditions for a resignation," according to Pope Francis, unless "a serious physical impediment" arose, in which case a "letter of resignation" deposited in the Secretariat of State signed by Bergoglio at the beginning of

his pontificate would apply.

He added that the possibility remains remote, since the Pope "is in good health and, God willing, there are many projects still to be realized."

The generational genocide in Argentina

The book spans over 300 pages and covers all aspects of Pope Francis's life, from his relationship with his family, especially with his grandparents, their emigration to Argentina in 1929, a "little derailment" during his seminary period, and World War II with its dramatic atomic epilogue.

"The use of atomic energy for war purposes is a crime against humanity, our dignity, and any future possibility in our common home," said the Pope, posing the heavy question of how one can claim to be a "champion of peace and justice while building new weapons of war."

The pages traverse the history of the Argentine dictatorship, the deep connections that Jorge Mario Bergoglio had with those who did not survive it, his



Pope Francis delivers his blessing at the end of his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, March 13, 2024. VATICAN MEDIA

commitment to sheltering young people at risk during General Jorge Rafael Videla's regime, and the failed attempt to save his influential teacher, Esther.

What happened in Argentina "was a generational genocide," wrote the Pope, who also addressed accusations of being somehow complicit with the dictatorship, refuted by the evidence of his opposition to "those atrocities."

Pope Francis wrote about Esther, a "true communist," an atheist "but respectful" who "never attacked faith. She taught me so much about politics."

This memory provided the Pope an opportunity, once again, to repeat that "talking about the poor does not automatically make

you a communist" since "the poor are the flag of the Gospel and are in Jesus' heart," and that "in Christian communities, property was shared: this is not communism, this is pure Christianity!"

### Defense of human life

The book continued through the Pope's staunch defense of human life, "from conception to death," where abortion "is murder," performed by "hired killers, hitmen!", calling the practice of surrogacy "inhumane."

The book also includes a chapter on soccer, Bergoglio's passion, writing about Maradona and his vow "to no longer watch TV."

Pope / A7

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## On women being builders of humanity

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## Towards a Personal Prelature for OFWs

Questions and objections to a novel idea for overseas Filipinos

## Church agency urges senators to side with truth, justice in Quiboloy probe

THE humanitarian and advocacy arm of the Catholic Church urged lawmakers, particularly senators, to pursue the truth regarding the alleged sexual abuses within Apollo Quiboloy's ministry.

"Caritas Philippines emphasized the need of ensuring

Quiboloy / A7

## Bishop voices concern over allowing civilians to own semi-automatic rifles



Bishop Oscar Jaime Florencio of the Military Ordinariate of the Philippines. NIKKO BALBEDINA

A CATHOLIC bishop has reservations about the Philippine police move to allow civilians to own semi-automatic rifles.

Bishop Oscar Jaime Florencio

of the military diocese said he is personally against allowing civilians to possess rifles, or any firearms for that matter.

"Why will we need those guns? Give them to authorities. If civilians are allowed to have guns, it might cause another big problem," Florencio said over Radio Veritas.

The bishop cited the situation in the United States as an example, where mass shooting incidents are on the rise.

"In America, why do they have such a problem? Because they have a very lax law, wherein anyone can own a gun without that responsibility over a deadly weapon," he lamented.

He also pointed out how such a scenario may only become

Rifles / A7

## Bishop calls to protect Bohol's 'natural wonders'

A CATHOLIC bishop in Bohol encouraged the faithful to protect the province's "unique gifts" following the controversy surrounding a resort built within the iconic Chocolate Hills.

Bishop Alberto Uy of Tagbilaran said it is important for Boholans to "recognize and cherish" Bohol's landmarks including its pristine beaches, centuries-old churches and "myriad of other natural wonders".

"We should strive to appreciate and preserve these treasures that make our province truly special," Uy said in a social media post on Thursday.

A video of the Captain's Peak Resort, built within the protected zone of the Chocolate Hills, went



FILE PHOTO OF THE CHOCOLATE HILLS IN BOHOL.

viral online this week, drawing uproar from netizens.

The controversy prompted the environment department to dispatch a team to probe potential violations of last year's temporary

closure order on the facility.

Both Houses of Congress, the Senate and the House of Representatives, are also seeking an inquiry into the construction of

Bohol / A7

## African Bishops: 'Stop plundering mineral and natural resources in Africa'

By LISA ZENGARINI  
Vatican News

SPEAKERS at a seminar convened by the Symposium of the Episcopal Conference of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) have urged the international community to stop plundering mineral and natural resources in Africa, highlighting the critical nexus between the indiscriminate exploitation of its riches and conflicts on the continent.

### The seminar in Accra, Ghana

Meeting in Accra, Ghana, from 8-10 March to discuss the theme "Conflicts in Africa in the Context of the Exploitation of Natural and Mining Resources," they called for an end to the ruthless depletion of natural resources by multinational corporations and foreign powers.

Participants in the seminar said resource exploitation is causing

immense suffering to Africans, including conflicts and forced displacements of populations.

The seminar was organized in collaboration with the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and several Catholic organizations, including the U.S. Catholic Relief Service, and the German-based Misereor Foundation.

### Hands off Africa!

Participants comprised bishops, priests, and lay Catholics hailing from Africa and beyond who engaged in discussions covering a spectrum of pertinent topics, including the exploitation of mining and other natural resources in Africa, theological reflections, legal frameworks and regulations, the Church's commitment in this domain, advocacy initiatives, as well as strategies for future endeavors aimed at addressing the multifaceted challenges associated with these situations, particularly conflicts and

their ramifications stemming from the exploitation of natural resources.

Speakers unanimously echoed Pope Francis' prophetic words in his opening speech to Congolese authorities in Kinshasa during his Apostolic Journey to the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2023.

In his impassioned plea, the Pope implored, "Hands off Africa! Stop choking Africa; it is not a mine to be stripped or a terrain to be plundered. May Africa be the protagonist of its own destiny!"

In his keynote speech, the President of SECAM, Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo of Kinshasa, reiterated the need to ensure that Africa's riches contribute to its development, benefit the majority of its people, alleviate poverty, and foster peace.

He underscored the paradoxical scenario wherein significant foreign investments in oil, gas, mining, and natural resources fail to adequately benefit the local populations.

## Camino Croatia: A medieval pilgrimage route restored

By EMMA SILVESTRI  
Catholic News Agency

SINCE the Middle Ages, a great number of ancient roads throughout Europe have led to Santiago de Compostela (St. James of Compostela) — a shrine in Spain dedicated to St. James the Apostle and the destination of 1 million pilgrims every year. Unbeknownst to many, Croatia boasts one of those ancient routes leading to the famous shrine.

Officially registered in 2015, the Confraternity of St. James in Croatia began to promote the country's pilgrimage route, which covers 3,000 kilometers (more than 1,850 miles). It's called "Camino Croatia."

"In the beginning, we didn't know we would be walking in the footsteps of our medieval ancestors," said Vedran Prazen, the secretary of the confraternity.

Prazen says he and other interested citizens began doing research and found that there were people who were walking to Santiago de Compostela from Croatia back in the early 1300s.

"Records date to 1203. And we found proof of annual meetings of the Confraternity of St. James from the 15th and 14th centuries," Prazen told CNA.

However, despite the fact that Croatia had such a long-standing tradition, the country was barely included in the "Spanish pilgrim passport"—the document souvenir that is stamped at each overnight stay of a Santiago pilgrimage.

"On the map of Europe crisscrossing the routes of St. James, we were one of the few

countries in Europe that did not have the modern Camino routes," Prazen said.

### The Camino's rise in popularity

The revival of the Way of St. James (known more commonly as "the Camino") started in the late 1970s, when the roads of the pilgrimage were almost forgotten after being shut by war with Spain.

Pope John Paul II helped to popularize the Camino when he visited Santiago de Compostela in 1982. A few years later, in 1989, he organized the World Youth Day in Santiago, where he even walked a couple of kilometers himself to the basilica.

The Way of St. James has spread ever since. Over the past few decades, there have been books written and movies made, giving even more visibility to this popular pilgrimage.

### Restoring 'Camino Croatia'

The Confraternity of St. James in Croatia began to reestablish these routes, setting up the project "Camino Croatia." The first step, Prazen said, was to "map all the church[es] and shrines dedicated to Santiago in Croatia," drawing roads from different directions of the country, to reach Santiago. The total distance was estimated at about 3,000 kilometers (1,864 miles).

Then the confraternity — which today counts 42 members, all volunteers — began restoring the old medieval roads, putting up signs and organizing pilgrim infrastructures. A great number of local tourist boards helped finance this huge project, half of which has now been completed.

### Connecting with strangers

So what is the Camino Croatia



Female pilgrim on Camino Portugues de la Costa, Portugal, August 2021. CONFRATERNITY OF ST. JAMES - CROATIA

experience like?

"Speaking as a Catholic, the Way of St. James is a pilgrimage, but it's much more than that," Prazen explained. "The Camino attracts everybody — atheists, agnostics, Muslims, Buddhists, people of all faiths and of no faith. The experience that it provides is a deep experience based on something inherent in all human beings and expressed in the words of St. Augustine: 'Our souls are restless, Lord, until they rest in you.'"

"On the Camino, you live the Gospel values, not because somebody told you, not because you read it, but simply because while you are here, these are very natural behaviors."

Even where there is no premium lodging, and there are waiting lines for the restroom, Prazen noted that there is an "interesting kind of harmony amongst pilgrims."

"It's easy to establish connections, deep bonds with other human beings — even complete strangers — that you have just met for five minutes. It's as if on the Camino, everybody is the best version of themselves," he said.

## Vatican Briefing

### Pontifical Gregorian University announces merger with biblical, Eastern institutes

The historic Jesuit-run Pontifical Gregorian University announced its official merger with the Pontifical Biblical Institute and the Pontifical Oriental Institute. The Gregorian announced on its website on March 18 that, per a decree from Jesuit Superior General Father Arturo Sosa, the university's new General Statutes will "permanently incorporate" the two institutes with the Gregorian into one corporate structure. The merger of the three Rome-based schools will take effect on Pentecost Sunday, May 19. The institutions will merge "while still retaining their own names and missions," the university said. The Gregorian currently has an enrollment of about 2,700 students, 70% of whom come from outside Italy. The two institutes, meanwhile, instruct approximately 300 students each and offer graduate-level degrees in topics such as canon law and sacred Scripture. (CNA)

### Pope Francis names U.S. police professional, Colombian bishop to minor protection commission

Pope Francis appointed an American former law enforcement professional as adjunct secretary to the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors and a Colombian bishop as secretary of the independent body tasked since 2014 with advising the pope on how the Church can best protect minors and vulnerable adults.

The Vatican announced March 15 that Teresa Morris Kettelkamp, a Chicago native and Illinois law enforcement professional, was named as the commission's adjunct secretary. Auxiliary Bishop Luis Manuel Alí Herrera of Bogotá, Colombia, was named secretary of the commission, replacing Father Andrew Small, who had served as temporary secretary since 2021. Both appointees were already members of the currently 19-member commission. The commission, established by Pope Francis in March 2014, is headed by Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston, who turns 80 in June. O'Malley has defended the commission's effectiveness, saying last March that "the protection of children and vulnerable persons remains at the heart of the Church's mission." (CNA)

### Pope Francis: Indigenous 'ancestral wisdom' a vital tool in fight against climate change

Pope Francis on March 14 reflected on the importance of holding up Indigenous voices and incorporating "ancestral wisdom" as part of broader efforts to mitigate the effects of anthropogenic climate change. "Open dialogue between Indigenous knowledge and the sciences, between communities of ancestral wisdom and those of the sciences, can help to confront in a new, more integral and more effective way such crucial issues as water, climate change, hunger, and biodiversity," the pope observed at the Vatican. "These issues, as we know very well, are all interconnected." The remarks were addressed to participants of the conference "Indigenous Peoples' Knowledge and the Sciences," sponsored by the Pontifical Academies of Sciences and Social Sciences, held at the Vatican from March 14-15. (CNA)

### Pope Francis: We have a duty to help women accept the gift of life

Pope Francis said that governments and civil society have a fundamental duty to help ensure that women are able to accept the gift of life. "Institutions, social and political, have the fundamental duty to protect and promote the dignity of every human being, offering women, the bearers of life, the necessary conditions to be able to accept the gift of life and ensure a dignified existence for their children," Pope Francis said on March 10. Speaking from the window of the Vatican's Apostolic Palace, the pope said at the end of his Angelus address that he wanted to express his closeness to all women after International Women's Day, especially those whose dignity is not respected. "There is still a lot of work that each of us must do in order for there to be concrete recognition of the equal dignity of women," Francis added. (CNA)

### Pope Francis appoints UCLA astrophysicist to Pontifical Academy of Sciences

Pope Francis has appointed a California-based astrophysicist to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, the Vatican announced March 8. The Holy Father nominated Andrea Mia Ghez as an ordinary member of the Vatican City-based academy. Ghez's website says she is "best known for her groundbreaking work on the center of our galaxy, which has led to the best evidence to date for the existence of supermassive black holes." Her work contributed to the "discovery of a supermassive compact object, now generally recognized to be a black hole, in the Milky Way's galactic center," her website states. The professor earned a bachelor's degree in physics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a doctoral degree in physics from the California Institute of Technology. She has "received numerous honors and awards, including the 2020 Nobel Prize in physics," the Vatican said. Ghez was born in New York City. In the past, she has cited the Apollo space program as an inspiration for her subsequent astrophysics career. (CNA)

### Pope Francis to clergy abuse commission: 'Our commitment must not wane'

Pope Francis encouraged the papal commission tasked with combatting clergy abuse to move forward in their efforts to make the Church a safer environment for both minors and vulnerable adults. Acknowledging that it is easy to feel discouraged when confronting the realities of the sexual abuse crisis, the pope told the the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors on March 7 that "our commitment must not wane." "Indeed, I encourage you to move forward so that the Church will be, always and everywhere, a place where everyone can feel at home," Pope Francis said. Underscoring the importance of listening "firsthand" to abuse victims, the pope stressed to the body that "we cannot help others to bear their burdens unless we shoulder them ourselves, unless we show genuine closeness and compassion." (CNA)

## Argentine President Milei: Abortion is aggravated homicide

By JULIETA VILLAR  
ACI Prensa

THE president of Argentina, Javier Milei, says abortion "is murder aggravated by the bond" between mother and child and condemned the so-called "voluntary interruption of pregnancy," a euphemism for killing the child in the womb.

The statement was part of a March 6 speech at the beginning of classes at the secondary level at Cardenal Copello School in Buenos Aires, where Milei was a student.

In Argentine penal law, "homicide aggravated by the bond" is a degree of murder in which the killer and the victim are related by blood or intimate relationship.

The president, who during his election campaign had pledged that he was going to repeal the country's permissive abortion law, also took aim at the "murderers with green neckerchiefs," referring to the neckerchiefs imprinted with

the message "legal, safe, and free abortion" that were worn or displayed by activists during their campaign to get abortion legalized in 2020 at the start of President Alberto Fernández's term in office.

"For me, abortion is a murder aggravated by the bond and I can demonstrate that from a mathematical and philosophical perspective, from liberalism and also from a biological perspective," the president said before an auditorium full of students and teachers at the school.

"What politicians do," Milei continued, "is party and pass the bill to generations that haven't even been born, and some politicians, who also try to kill, are the murderers with the green neckerchiefs."

Although Milei's government has expressed its opposition to abortion on numerous occasions, in his first three months as president he hasn't introduced any specific bill. In Argentina, a bill can also be introduced in congress by the

executive branch.

A few days before the 2023 elections, Milei's running mate, then candidate and now vice president Victoria Villarruel, said in an interview that repealing the abortion law is an issue that "doesn't have such urgency considering that the economy is totally outrageous and you can't do business or live, you can't rent and you also have no security."

However, last February congresswoman Rocío Bonacci, a member of La Libertad Avanza (Freedom Advances), the victorious political coalition led by Milei, introduced a bill to repeal the existing abortion law. This sparked a controversy within the coalition, since she didn't have the coalition's approval nor had the president himself been consulted.

"The bill is my initiative, not the executive branch's, and has been introduced for the consideration of the body that I am a member of. I defend life. Nothing more, nothing less," Bonacci said at that time.

# Vatican allows inquiry into Filipino teen's sainthood cause

By BUENA LUZ

THE Vatican has given permission to open the sainthood cause of a Filipino teenage girl, a Catholic bishop said.

The Dicastery for the Causes of Saints granted the "nihil obstat" (nothing stands in the way), allowing the Diocese of Laoag to commence a local inquiry into the reputation and sanctity of Niña Ruiz-Abad.

This indicates that Bishop Renato Mayugba of Laoag, as the competent authority to initiate the diocesan process, could start the investigation.

Mayugba announced the news in a circular released on March 3, which was read in all Ilocos Norte churches.

The prelate commenced his letter by proclaiming: "Lætare!" (Rejoice!) to the clergy, religious and lay faithful of the diocese, as the Vatican judged that nothing stands in the way of the diocesan inquiry into the life of sanctity and heroic virtues of the "Servant of God".

After securing overwhelming support from the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines during the July assembly last year, Mayugba submitted a detailed biography of the candidate to the Vatican dicastery and petitioned for permission to begin his investigation.

The granting of the nihil obstat by



Bishop Renato Mayugba of Laoag (right) and Disalced Augustinian Fray Dennis Duane Ruiz, Postulator of the Ruiz Abad Cause, receive the "Nihil Obstat" from Archbishop Fabio Fabene (center), Secretary of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, in the Vatican on Feb. 5, 2024.

the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints for the start of the diocesan inquiry is among the necessary stages in the preliminary phase of a cause.

The bishop also announced that on April 7, Divine Mercy Sunday, the Beatification and Canonization Cause of Abad will be officially opened with the first session of the tribunal specially convened for this purpose.

The session, which will be held at the St. William's Cathedral Church in Laoag, will be open for the public to witness.

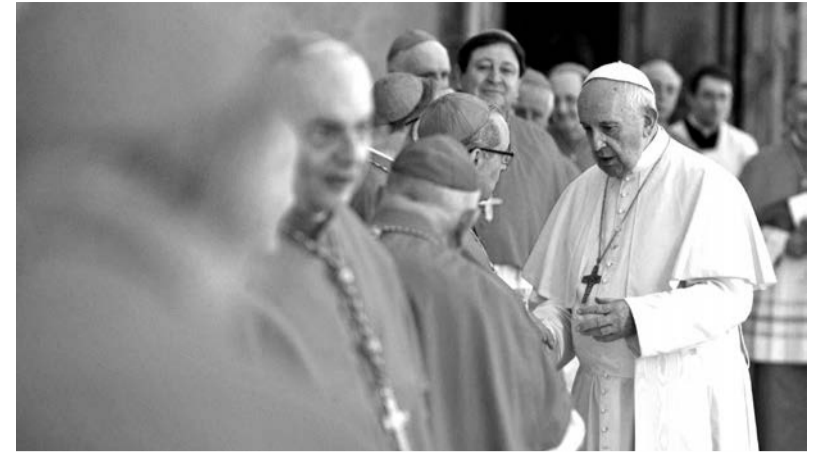
While awaiting the designated day for the opening of the Cause, the bishop urged the faithful "to pray for

God's blessing as we embark on this process..."

Abad, the young girl from Sarrat, was described as having a strong devotion to the Eucharist and devoted her life to distributing rosaries, Bibles, prayer books, holy images, and other religious items.

Her unwavering Catholic faith made her an inspiration to numerous people in the Ilocos Norte province, as well as in her neighborhood and school in Quezon City.

Abad passed away at the age of 13 in 1993 from hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, an incurable cardiac disease.



A file photo of cardinals with Pope Francis. VATICAN MEDIA

## Analysis: The ever-changing College of Cardinals

By ANDREA GAGLIARDUCCI  
Catholic News Agency

THE most recent change in the College of Cardinals took place on Feb. 24, when Cardinal José Luis Lacunza Maestrojuán turned 80 and was thus removed from the ranks of cardinal-electors. A few weeks earlier, on Feb. 12, Cardinal Pedro Ricardo Barreto Jimeno also turned 80 and, therefore, is no longer eligible to cast a vote in a conclave.

There are currently 129 cardinals who could vote in a conclave, nine more than the maximum of 120 set by Paul VI and confirmed by all of his successors since.

During the 11 years of his pontificate, Pope Francis has convened nine consistories to create new cardinals. In the process, he has created 142 cardinals, including 113 electors and 29 non-electors, from 70 nations. Of these nations, 22 had never had a cardinal before.

This level of activity stands in contrast with St. John Paul II, who convened nine consistories during a 27-year-long pontificate, as well as Pope Benedict XVI, who convened five in eight years. Nonetheless, the record for new red hats belongs to John Paul II, who created 231 new cardinals during his pontificate.

Were a conclave to begin today, there would be 94 cardinal-electors created by Pope Francis, 27 created by Benedict XVI, and eight made by John Paul II. To elect the pope, a block of 86 votes would be needed (two-thirds of the assembly), and the cardinals created by Pope Francis are more than two-thirds.

### What the College of Cardinals will look like at the end of 2024

However, by the end of 2024, 10 more cardinals will lose the right to vote in the conclave. Therefore, if Pope Francis were not to convene a new consistory by the end of the year, the number would return below the maximum of 120 cardinal-electors.

Among the 10 cardinals who will turn 80 in the next few months, there is Cardinal Luis Francisco Ladaria Ferrer, prefect emeritus of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, considered influential but who has long wanted to leave public office, having asked the pope to also be dispensed from participating in the Synod on Synodality. Cardinal Marc Ouellet, prefect emeritus of the Dicastery for Bishops, will also turn 80.

For the other four cardinals who will turn 80 over the next 10 months, the pope must find a successor for their respective roles, as they are all still in active service. These are the archbishop of Boston and president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, Cardinal Sean Patrick O'Malley (June 29); the major penitentiary of the Apostolic Penitentiary, Cardinal Mauro Piacenza (Sept. 15); the archbishop of Caracas, Venezuela, Cardinal Baltazar Enrique Porras Cardozo (Oct. 10); and the archbishop of Bombay, India, Cardinal Oswald Gracias (Dec. 24).

O'Malley and Gracias are also members of the Council of Cardinals established by the pope for the reform and government of the Roman Curia.

Cardinal Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhanekhoun, apostolic vicar of Vientiane, Laos, will also turn 80

in 2024, as will Cardinal Polycarp Pengo, archbishop emeritus of Dar-es-Salam, Tanzania; Cardinal Jean-Pierre Ricard, archbishop emeritus of Bordeaux, France; and Cardinal John Njue, archbishop emeritus of Nairobi, Kenya.

In light of the above, by the end of 2024, the cardinal-electors created by Pope Francis will number 91, while those made by previous popes will have been drastically reduced. In fact, by that time at a future conclave, there will only be 22 cardinals created by Benedict XVI and six by John Paul II.

### A Francis-like conclave?

These numbers suggest that the election of a successor to Pope Francis could very quickly be oriented toward a papal profile similar to that of Pope Francis. In reality, however, the outcome of the conclave could be very different.

For the most part, popes have convened consistories to discuss and consult the cardinals on major issues for the life of the Church.

During his pontificate, however, Pope Francis has only convened a consistory three times to discuss issues at hand. This first occurred in 2014, when another consistory accompanied the consistory for the creation of new cardinals to discuss family issues, with a report by Cardinal Walter Kasper.

In 2015, the reform of the Curia was discussed with various reports and in 2022, the pope asked the cardinals to take into account the reform of the Curia he had just established with the apostolic constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*.

The last consistory's discussion structure also differed from the usual pattern. The cardinals were gathered in small linguistic groups; not all of them could speak before the assembly and several left written documents on what their speech would have been without presenting it before the other members of the College of Cardinals. While presented as an effort to make the discussion more efficient, this structure took away traditionally important moments of interaction and mutual understanding.

These are not just minor details. The discussions that take place during consistories allow the cardinals to get to know each other and the personalities involved to define themselves more precisely.

For example, the papal candidacy of Cardinal Karol Wojtyla emerged from some of these discussions, along with the fact that Paul VI had called upon him to preach the spiritual exercises of Lent at the Curia in 1976. Although Wojtyla was an authoritative and well-known figure, it would not have been easy to obtain the support of his fellow cardinals if he had not had the opportunity to make himself known in these circumstances.

The next conclave, therefore, will get underway with somewhat of a handicap inasmuch as the cardinals will not know each other as well. This could be a boon, on the one hand, to the formation of pressure groups that could steer the conclave in one direction or another. But, on the other hand, it will also likely make the outcome more unpredictable. For this reason, although Pope Francis has created more than two-thirds of the cardinal-electors, it is by no

College of Cardinals / A6

## Hong Kong's draconian National Security Law won't affect seal of confession, diocese says

By MATTHEW SANTUCCI  
Catholic News Agency

THE Diocese of Hong Kong on Friday issued a statement that the seal of confession would not be violated under the new National Security Law, legislation that grants greater latitude to prosecute crimes of treason and foreign political interference.

"With regard to the legislation of Article 23 on safeguarding national security, the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong recognizes that as a citizen, it has obligation to national security," the March 15 statement said.

In the brief statement, released on Friday, the Diocese of Hong Kong stated that the legislation will not alter the confidential nature of confession (the sacrament of reconciliation) of the Church. According to diocesan figures, the Catholic population of Hong Kong — a city of 7.5 million — is 392,000.

The new 212-page homegrown National Security Law, also known as Article 23 of the Basic Law — the constitutional document guaranteeing Hong Kong a high degree of autonomy under Chinese rule — is the latest attempt to curtail

civil liberty and crack down on crimes against national security, including treason, espionage, external interference, and disclosure of state secrets.

The draft bill in the Special Administrative Region comes after Beijing imposed a sweeping National Security Law in June 2020, granting the government maximum latitude to interpret threats to national security and the unchecked authority to crack down on any form of perceived political dissidence and public protest.

### Clergy could face 14 years in prison

The proposed legislation, unveiled on March 8, comes after a four-week-long consultation period, culminating in a 220-page summary report. The new legislation carries up to life imprisonment for treason, while failure to disclose treason committed by others carries a maximum prison sentence of 14 years. It includes a provision to protect attorneys from being charged with treason but does not allow clergy the same protection.

Hong Kong's Secretary for Justice Paul Lam Ting-kwok told journalists last week that it would be "very difficult to create exceptions"

for people like clergy and social workers.

### U.S. weighs in

U.S. lawmakers have expressed fears that the new law would further erode fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong and be used to bring it further under the orbit of Beijing.

"With Article 23 legislation, the Hong Kong government explicitly seeks to bring local laws in line with the PRC's expansive concept of national security. This aligns with General Secretary Xi Jinping's political agenda as codified in the 1025 PRC National Security Law," a March 14 letter sent by the Congressional-Executive Committee on China to U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated.

"The Hong Kong government already routinely uses the pretext of 'national security' to gut the free press and quash any semblance of political opposition," the statement continued.

An attempt was first made to push through Article 23 in 2003 — following the handover of Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to Chinese rule in 1997 — was shelved following popular backlash when more than 500,000 people took to the streets to protest.

## Pope Francis: Study groups to examine 10 Synod on Synodality themes through June 2025

By MATTHEW SANTUCCI  
Catholic News Agency

CHURCH experts will meet in study groups to examine the question of women deacons and other key topics through June 2025 — well beyond the Oct. 27 conclusion of the final assembly of the Synod on Synodality, Pope Francis revealed in a new letter to the synod's general secretary released on March 14.

Writing to Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary general of the General Secretariat of the Synod, the pope noted that the 42-page Synthesis Report produced after the first session of the synod assembly held last October "enumerates many important theological issues," which "by their very nature, require in-depth study."

Because it won't be possible to complete this study before the start of the next synod assembly on Oct. 2, the pope explained, "I am arranging for them to be assigned to specific study groups, so that they may be properly examined."



Pope Francis at the conclusion of the Synod on Synodality on Oct. 28, 2023. ROY LAGARDE

In his letter Pope Francis listed 10 themes he wants the study groups to examine. They are:

1. Some aspects of the relationship between the Eastern Catholic Churches and the Latin Church.
2. Listening to the cry of the poor.
3. The mission in the digital environment.
4. The revision of the Ratio Fundamental Institutionis Sacerdotalis in a missionary synodal perspective.

5. Some theological and canonical matters regarding specific ministerial forms.

6. The revision, in a synodal missionary perspective, of the documents touching on the relationship between bishops, consecrated life, and ecclesial associations.

7. Some aspects of the person and ministry of the bishop (criteria for selecting candidates to episcopacy, judicial function of

Study groups / A7



## REJOICE IN THE TRUTH

CARDINAL ORLANDO B. QUEVEDO, OMI

### Memories of the Holy Week

HOLY Week begins with the celebration of Palm Sunday and ends when the Mass of Holy Saturday begins. The climax of the celebration is the Paschal Triduum, celebrating the Last Supper on Holy Thursday, the Passion and Death of Christ on Good Friday, and the Resurrection of Christ on Eastern Sunday. The name "Holy Week" was used in the 4th century by St. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, and by St. Epiphanius of Constantia.

Many people sometimes wonder why the four days of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday could be called the Paschal Triduum (Holy Three Days). Here is the reason. At the time of Jesus, a day is determined from sunset to sunset. Thus, the first day of the Holy Triduum is from sunset of Holy Thursday to sunset of Good Friday. The second day is from sunset of Good Friday to sunset of Holy Saturday. And the third day is from sunset of Holy Saturday to sunset of Easter Sunday.

As we approach the holiest week of the liturgical year, I remember some significant memories of past Holy Weeks.

#### Palm Sunday:

On the day before Palm Sunday, my older brothers would climb a coconut tree and cut down two branches. I would watch them as they transform the branches into some beautiful shapes. Each member of our family would then happily carry a palm to our parish church in Marbel, Koronadal Valley (South Cotabato) for the blessing of palms, making sure that some Holy Water would fall on our palms. Nowadays, the selling of beautifully shaped palms has become a lucrative enterprise. Moreover, many people stay in the church rather than join the procession after the blessing of the palms in order to keep their places in the pews.

#### Holy Thursday:

My father was once chosen as one of the 12 Apostles for Holy Thursday. I saw him wash his feet and wear a new pair of socks for the washing of the feet. Our Parish Priest, an American Oblate of Mary Immaculate, would kneel and wash my father's right foot, that had already been washed. Not so with one or two of the other Apostles. Old unwashed socks and unwashed feet are far from fragrant.

#### Good Friday:

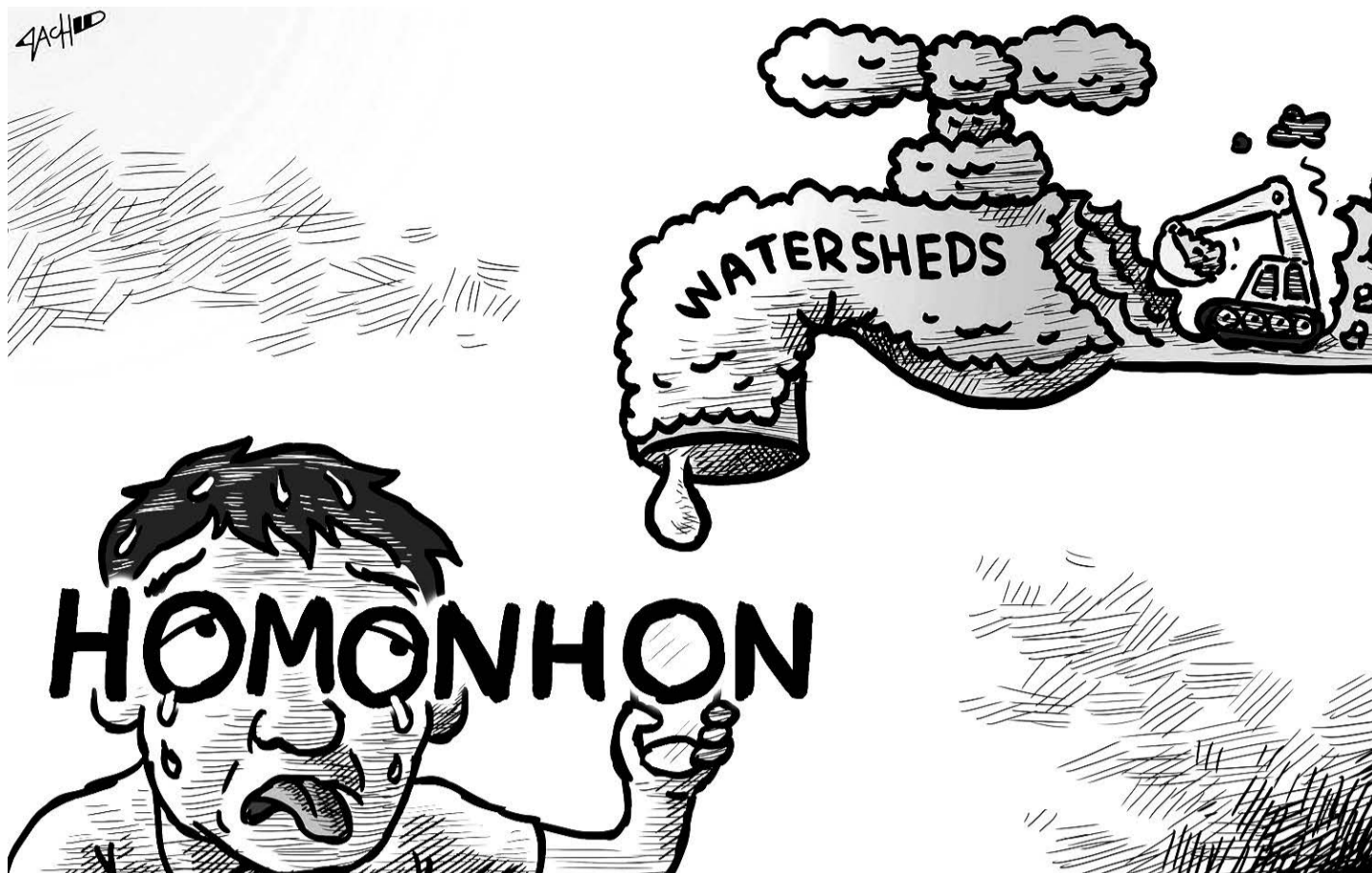
On Good Friday, our family had a very strict rule: Silence and no music. The Seven Last Words were delivered in Hiligaynon by my High School Spanish teacher. He had been in his last year of theology in a seminary in the Visayas when World War II broke out. He had gotten married. Our parish priest asked him to do the Seven Last Words to a fully packed church in sweltering heat with not a single electric fan. It was a fitting participation in the sufferings of Christ. When his wife died, he decided to return to his original vocation. He informed his two children, then had a two-year updating course in Theology. He was ordained a priest by the late Bishop Gerard Mongeau, O.M.I., of Cotabato. He was already in his 70's.

Our family was once chosen to have one of the Stations of the Cross. We built one bamboo booth in front of our house and decorated it with palm branches. Inside the booth was a table covered with white linen. We displayed on the table the image of the Station assigned to us. No flowers on the table, just candles. My mother had the flowers removed, to show the stark somberness and simplicity of the Cross.

#### Holy Saturday / Easter Sunday:

When I was a young priest at the Cotabato diocesan seminary, the Rector instructed me to help at a parish for Easter Sunday. I was there for the Encuentro or Salubong, where an angel would lift the veil covering the face of Our Blessed Mother and would behold her Risen Son. The procession with the Blessed Mother and the procession with the Risen Jesus met at the town park in front of the church. Little angels began singing Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia. Then one of the angels was

Rejoice in the truth / A6



## Editorial

### On women being builders of humanity

AT first blush, one may think that this is some kind of misandry if not an undue bias for the feminine. Of course, this is nothing of that sort. This is rather the stuff of an international congress titled "Women in the Church: Builders of humanity," held on March 7-8, 2023 participated by groups from pontifical universities and Catholic entities in Rome. This was convened by the dicasteries of the Vatican led by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life.

The congress highlighted the lives of 10 women who, according to Pope Francis in his address, "at different times and in different cultures, each in her own distinct way, gave proof through initiatives of charity, education and prayer of how the 'feminine genius' can uniquely reflect God's holiness in the midst of our world."

The 10 featured women were: St. Josephine Bakhita, Venerable Magdeleine of Jesus, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, St. Mary Mackillop, St. Laura of Saint Catherine of Siena (Laura Montoya), St. Kateri Tekakwitha, St. Teresa of Calcutta (Mother Teresa), St. Rebecca (Rafqa Ar-Rayès), Blessed Maria Corsini-Beltrame Quattrocchi, and Servant of God Daphrose Rugamba.

"Indeed, precisely at time in history when women were largely excluded from social and ecclesial life, the Holy Spirit raised up saints whose attractiveness produced new spiritual vigor and

important reforms in the Church. Here too, I think of all those unknown or forgotten women who, each in her own way, sustained and transformed families and communities by the power of their witness," said Pope Francis, adding that women have the vocation as "builders" in the sense that they cooperate with the Creator in the service of life, the common good, and peace.

The undersecretary of the Vatican's Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life, Gabriella Gambino, thinking along the lines of the Pope said that the Church is a woman not only because she is the bride of Christ, but also because she is built by holy women, who, moved with the intimate and deep relationship with Christ, have contributed their lives to the evangelization of cultures in different regions of the world as they responded with courage to the challenges of their times.

Indeed it is without contention that women in the Church have done so much in building humanity throughout history. But really they are not only the women inside the confines of the Church that have helped, in complementarity with men, in building the world. Saint John Paul II talked about this in his documents, the likes of *Mulieris Dignitatem* and his 1995 Letter to Women.

In his Letter to Women, he said, "This is a matter of justice but also of necessity. Women will increasingly play a part in

the solution of the serious problems of the future: leisure time, the quality of life, migration, social services, euthanasia, drugs, health care, the ecology, etc." He also thanked women "who have devoted their lives to defending the dignity of womanhood by fighting for their basic social, economic and political rights, demonstrating courageous initiative at a time when this was considered extremely inappropriate, the sign of a lack of femininity, a manifestation of exhibitionism, and even a sin!"

Saint John Paul II who popularized the "feminine genius," also conveyed his appreciation to women who are involved in the various areas of education extending well beyond the family: nurses, schools, universities, social service agencies, parishes, associations and movements. Wherever the work of education is called for, we can note that women are ever ready and willing to give themselves generously to others, especially in serving the weakest and most defenseless."

While it is appropriate to call to mind the role of women in building humanity, and while it is true that in some races and cultures the feminine genius is never cherished, nay, acknowledged, at the end of the day one has to admit that building humanity is never a monopoly of either gender. It is, admittedly, the heroism and valor of people irrespective of their sexes.



## IN THE FENCE OF HOPE

BISHOP GERARDO A. ALMINAZA

LAST March 6, Negros Occidental celebrated the fifth anniversary of what was a hard-fought triumph in our beloved province's clean energy journey. Five years ago, thousands of young people, members and leaders of the Church community, civil society groups, grassroots communities, and advocates mobilized and won a provincial declaration to keep Negros Occidental coal-free.

This win, of course, was a continuation of Negrosanon's decades-long history of pushing back against dirty energy from fossil fuels and destructive industries. Coal-fired power plant propositions in Bago, Silay, Pulupandan, and, finally, our dear city of San Carlos were taken down again and again by brave communities and stewards of Creation who knew we cannot allow such a destructive facility in Negros. More recently, a mining project in Sagay was also stopped due to fierce opposition from communities. All this is what shaped Negros into the hope spot for renewables and sustainability that we know today, with a generating capacity of nearly 100% installed in the island.

What is unfortunate for Negros Occidental is that while we have an abundance of clean energy as a province, the power we use still comes from coal and other facilities from outside the island. As such, Negrosanons of all walks of life and even supporters beyond Negros have been working hand in hand

to change this, and to make our province truly fully powered by sustainable energy.

I was honored to be part of one of the latest initiatives to take this mission forward, alongside Bishop Patricio Buzon of Bacolod and Bishop Louie Galbines of Kabankalan. In February, the provincial government of Negros Occidental launched the SecuRE Negros campaign. It intends to be a commitment from the government to advance a just renewable energy transition in the province, and an avenue for a multi-stakeholder approach and collaboration in making this transition happen. At its core, it acknowledges that reliable, accessible, affordable, and sustainable energy can really only come from renewables—and that shifting where we source the power we use will be extremely beneficial to the people of Negros Occidental.

It is exciting to see where this initiative can take us, especially as the imperative of fully embracing a transition out of fossil fuels confronts us with urgency. Just a few weeks ago, scientists confirmed that we have really breached the 1.5 °C threshold for a whole 12-month period, and radical change needs to happen if we are to get it back below that level by the end of the century. We are already seeing how fatal consequences are: even today, we lament with farmers and agriculture workers and their families all over the country whose livelihoods are heavily impacted by the El Niño phenomenon.

Worse, scientists forecast that the gravity of the situation could continue for three months more. Readers, may our prayers and thoughts be filled with the plight of those who suffer the most from the impacts of our intensely changing climate; at the same time, may our actions and words serve to lend help directly or to urge for action from our leaders in government responsible for disasters responses and climate action.

For our dear province of Negros Occidental, it is my hope that the many initiatives to bring clean energy from renewables within our people's reach will also translate to really putting a stop to the threats of dirty energy. Today, the San Miguel Corporation liquefied natural gas (LNG) project that replaced its defeated coal project in San Carlos has yet to be officially cancelled, with the Resolution of No Objection of the Sangguinang Panlalawigan of Negros Occidental also yet to be revoked. There are also still those voicing out in public false notions that fossil fuel facilities should be allowed to enter Negros to ensure our energy security, even though it is fossil fuel facilities that are causing power woes in our own island and neighboring provinces. But all these we can confront with courage, for we have a Creator who fuels our hope for a sustainable future.

Dear readers, may your days be also filled with hope!

CBCP

# Monitor

PROTAGONIST OF TRUTH, PROMOTER OF PEACE

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Email Address: info@cbcpnews.net,  
Business: +63 977 062 9090 ISSN 1908-2940.

Pedro Quitorio  
Editor-in-Chief

Most Rev Marcelino Antonio Maralit, D.D.  
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## BY THE ROADSIDE

MSGR. EUTQUIO BELIZAR, JR. SThD

*“How long will the land mourn and the grass of every field wither? For by the evil deeds of those who dwell in it the beasts and the birds are swept away, because they said, ‘He will not see our very end!’” (Jer 12:4).*

RECENTLY a resort built at the foot of Bohol’s famed Chocolate Hills created a nation-wide uproar. Photos and videos of the resort went viral. The uproar became even more heightened. The DENR was so stunned by the people’s reaction that, in an unusual lightning fashion, it ordered the termination of the resort’s operations. A priest from the Diocese of Borongan wryly observed online the unfairness of it all—a famous eco attraction is saved in record fashion while the more damaged, more ravaged site of Magellan’s landing that happened on March 17, 1521, is, until now, conveniently hidden from the public radar. Homonhon Island was where the foreigner Ferdinand Magellan landed in 1521. Now the foreign landings on the island are mostly by mining ships that have been voraciously gobbling down its minerals and leaving its land massively scarred and wasted.

But let me digress. Let me get personal. The bishop who ordained me, Bishop Nestor Carino, DD, once told me: “Euly, I need you to accept being assigned to Homonhon. I see no other priest available or willing to take the challenge.” With a lot of hesitation, I said yes. A few days after I said yes, I set sail for the historic place.

“Looks like I’ve been sent to Paradise,” I said to myself as I watched the white-sand beaches, tall coconut trees and a lush greenery of what I made out to be a forest still covering a sizable part of the place. I pinched my hand and asked myself, “Is this for real? Or am I in a dream?”

It was my first parish assignment as parish priest. The boat I was on sailed almost sheepishly closer to the shore of Brgy Casuguran, the center of the

parish, officially known as the Parish of St. John the Baptist. I do not want to exaggerate my first almost idyllic impression of the place. In fact, we arrived almost after four hours of a grueling trip that included sailing our way through cathedral-high waves, and consequently being drenched by both sea water and rain. Thankfully my books and personal effects were thoroughly covered with plastic and kept inside the boat’s cargo trunk. We were on a regular motor boat that people called “pump boat”. Sailing closely with us was another one just like it but which I could not see when the waves rose to cathedral heights. I remember saying to myself, “I’m in paradise and yet I’m feeling sick, not because of disease but because of the seas.”

I was impressed by how plentiful drinking water was. People told me we had real spring water because its source were real springs. They said they even brought spring water to Guiuan (the town to which Homonhon’s barangays territorially belonged) whenever they needed to go there to sell goods or buy supplies, so they could avoid drinking the local water. They thought Guiuan’s water was not as good. Though there was an El Niño that lasted for eight months, I do not remember being deprived of the cool potable water from the springs of the island. On the other hand, even then our spring water supply was under threat. I joined the campaign to save its forest not only because of forest fires, some of which were man-made due to ‘kaingin’, but also because of the El Niño. Mining was already an imminent problem. But the damage still seemed limited, largely hidden from the public eye. One of the things that struck and grieved me then was how people needed fertilizers to plant root crops and vegetables easily grown in Eastern Samar’s main land. The island’s soil seemed acidic and not too plant-friendly because of its minerals. While some bewailed the

## Remembering Homonhon, remembering Laudato Si’

land’s mineral-laden soil, others saw this as the island’s way to prosperity. Homonhon’ land became for some a promise of a poverty-free tomorrow.

Fast-forward to 2024. I cannot now believe my eyes whenever I see photos of the massive devastation the mining operations have brought Homonhon. Almost ironically no one hears of an equally massive prosperity in the island. People are still poor despite their mineral-rich island being ravaged in ways that seem irreversible. Like an innocent vulnerable ‘probinsyana’ (or country lass) the damage and—pardon the expression—seeming “gang rape” wrought on her by mining firms and their powerful allies may have reached a point of no-return. To a certain extent the sight is just as catastrophic as those we see in television news footages of war-torn areas of Ukraine that have been hit by Russia’s unforgiving missiles or areas of Gaza razed by Israeli bombings. The ever-wandering dust from the open pit mining fields continue to settle in homes, plants and nearby schools, threatening the very health and survival of residents. When I first saw Homonhon it looked like an island of green from the sea. Now it looks like a balding mud-brown expanse, slowly eating up what remains of its greenery.

Lately another scourge has come upon Homonhon Island. Trees and vegetation have been ordered cut down to make way for more mining and planting operations. The mining companies and people in power could soon deprive the islanders totally of their watershed. The island surrounded by the ocean could ironically embody Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem’s famous words: “Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink” (from “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”).

We would shake our heads and feel sorry for Homonhoners. But they are not the only victims. We all are. Pope

By the roadside / A6



## FAITH JOURNEY

SR. PINKY BARRIENTOS, FSP

## Journeying together in this season of Lent

THE Lenten season is a time of journeying within and outside ourselves. It is a journey that we take not only alone but also with others. Sometimes we have this mistaken notion that our spiritual journey is ours alone to take, that it is only “between God and me.” However, the reality is that, we are not an island. We live not only for ourselves, but with and for others as well. Our personal decisions have an impact on other people’s lives, whether we like it or not. Our spiritual well-being and relationship with God involves others as well.

During these 40 days of Lent, we are invited to have a change of heart, a continual conversion. It is an invitation to turn away from our usual way of doing things that do not help us grow spiritually in our relationship with the Lord.

The topic of conversion is a recurring theme throughout the season of Lent, consistently reminding us that God has created us for himself, hence we ought to live a life patterned to his will. The season of Lent calls us to urgent conversion, a complete turn-around from our sinful ways to be reconciled with God and with one another, once and for all.

The traditional practices of fasting, prayer and almsgiving during Lent provide us the opportunity to spend the season more meaningfully and fruitfully. And yet, the observance of these three pillars during the season of Lent may appear too ordinary for us. Don’t we usually do these

things, anyway? Nonetheless, we are challenged to look deeply into our hearts and ask ourselves: how involved are we when we do these Lenten practices? Are these Lenten observances carried out with love and generosity, or just done automatically?

Traditionally, the practice of fasting is a great discipline not only for the body but for the soul as well. But our media driven society has reduced fasting into a diet fad. Today, we read a lot about the importance of fasting from certain foods in order to lose body fat or lower cholesterol content in the body. But more than the physical benefits of fasting from unhealthy foods, however, is the spiritual benefit that fasting brings to us. Let’s hear it from St. Augustine: “fasting cleanses the soul, raises the mind, subjects one’s flesh to the spirit, renders the heart contrite and humble, scatters the clouds of concupiscence, quenches the fire of lust, and kindles the true light of chastity.” There, that’s quite a lot to digest and reflect on. Indeed, with fasting, we become more aware of our personal motivations; we become more sensitive to what is going on inside and outside of us. Through fasting, we are able to enter profoundly into our innermost selves and become more conscious of our relationship with God in prayer.

Fasting can also take on various forms. For example, we can fast from using our digital gadgets, especially during times when we are supposed

Faith journey / A6



## TIME OUT WITH DOC JOE

JOSE S. YAMAMOTO, M.D.

MODERN medicine has brought much improvement to those suffering from chronic diseases in terms of life span but there has been no direct correlation to health span, or the length of time that a person is healthy- not just alive. This should be the goal of all health practitioners, especially physicians – to extend both the life span and the health span. A physician’s goal should not just be to manage diseases in chronically ill patients but to institute measures to enhance and even lengthen functional health span.

The top causes of morbidity and mortality are chronic diseases of which cardiovascular, neurological and metabolic conditions figure prominently. Current medical guidelines provide for managing ill patients and making sure they faithfully take or use pharmacological products. The term “manage” implies that the goal is to keep patients dependent on medicines for the longest period or for the rest of their lives.

But what if, by imparting knowledge and information, the balance can be favorably tilted to favor better health span? Does that not make more sense?

In the previous issue, I wrote about nitric oxide not only as signaling molecule but as an ubiquitous substance that, if adequately supplied, can impact the health of people. I mentioned steps that can mitigate the loss of nitric oxide- to wit, avoiding regular and unabated use of mouthwash, eating green leafy vegetables to provide source for the nitric oxide building blocks and using supplements that enhance production of nitric oxide.

One other point that needs to be emphasized is that while nitric oxide is naturally produced and secreted, production diminishes as one ages. Chronological aging cannot be controlled but physiologically or functionally, much can be achieved.

Last February, my wife and I were invited to attend the CFC ( Couples for Christ) Seniors Conference in Butuan City. It was a happy and spiritually fulfilling weekend and yet somehow we realized that all the attendees were seniors in various levels of health span. Majority have maintenance medications and a fairly good number have mobility or ambulatory challenges. I saw brethren with a limp with some using walking canes.

When one thinks of maintenance medications, the expectation is that those drugs are lifelong companions that should extend the life of those who take them. In the case of our CFC seniors, we hope that their life span be indeed extended because there is still a lot that they can contribute, especially in the realm of teaching, training and mentoring young couples and aspiring leaders.

Every January, the top leaders of Couples for Christ ascend to the heights of Baguio to attend our annual Theme Weekend Retreat. All look forward to receiving the kind of spiritual nourishment that a retreat can provide. However, being an aging community, inevitably there are medical concerns that need to be attended to. Most can be handled on site but occasionally, some need to be sent to a nearby hospital for better monitoring. Of the medical concerns that need urgent medical attention, the most common is

## Nitric oxide in daily life

the sudden elevation of blood pressure that can become serious. The elevated BP may be due to the poor acclimation to heights, which is a physiological reaction, but more situations are due to failure to take maintenance medications or worse, diminished response to the usual maintenance dose. In these instances, I get to use the nitro supplement that I use personally and use that to good effect. The goal is to allow for the use of emergency medications but on top of these, we use the oral nitric oxide precursor supplement.

By putting 20 drops under the tongue and allowing it to mix with saliva for 1 minute or 2 before swallowing, the patient is monitored for the gentle relief of the hypertensive episode. The patient’s BP is checked every 5 minutes and in about 20 to 30 minutes a reduction and BP relief is achieved. While the supplement I use is non-prescription, the improvement it induces is scientifically based.

Over the years, I have been more confident in the use of the supplement because of its proven safety and efficacy. This has now been my approach in my practice of medicine - to combine the standard of care with the functional medicine approach. The goal of this combined approach is to teach people to understand their health and help them to implement steps that impact on their health span. Ultimately, the goal is to empower people to take their health seriously and to be more proactive in their efforts to stay healthy.

As we Christians like to say, our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. We should all take good care of it.



## THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW

FR. ELIAS “ELI” L. AYUBAN, JR., CMF

## Remembering Fr. Rhoel

ON the morning of March 20, 2000, Fr. Rhoel D. Gallardo, a Claretian missionary priest, along with several teachers and students of Claret School of Tumahubong in Basilan province and the neighboring elementary school, were abducted by the extremist group Abu Sayaff and were brought to the rebels’ camp in Mount Punoh Muhadji. Fr. Rhoel and companions were held captives for 44 days. On May 3, 2000, he died for the cause of faith and peace at the age of 34 years, barely five years after becoming a priest.

I am a witness to a part of Fr. Rhoel’s vocational and missionary journey. We were contemporaries in the seminary. Although I joined a couple of years ahead of him, he was ordained two years earlier because he was already a college graduate when he entered Claret Formation Center. Twenty-four years after his kidnapping, we remember the exemplary acts or series of acts of Fr. Rhoel that have made him a martyr of our times. All these begin with ‘s’ for easy recollection. He sacrificed, suffered, searched and surrendered.

First, his life was a life replete with sacrifices. He sacrificed when he renounced the possibility of forming a family of his own, when he let go of the chance of having a lucrative career and the opportunity to lead a relatively easy life, being born in a middle-class family. Above all, he sacrificed when he agreed to be assigned to

Tumahubong, which turned out to be his last [assignment].

Second, he had also his share of sufferings: as a seminarian, as a student of theology and as a missionary. I am privy to a few of the struggles of Fr. Rhoel as he tried to be faithful to his vocation and mission till the end. He was a man of few words. He kept many things to himself and, at times, he was misunderstood by a few because of his low-key and introverted personality.

He suffered during the days of his captivity: the endless walking as they were pursued by the military, the deprivation of food and the sleepless nights, among others. He suffered as he was hurt by his tormentors. Stories are told that his captors plucked out the nails of his hands and feet. He suffered as he was hit by three bullets in his back until he breathed his last.

Third, his was a life of constant search for God and his people. He was very reflective. We called him “Claret” not only because of his small stature, but more importantly, due to his life of fervent prayer and simplicity. He also searched for his sheep, especially the vulnerable female teachers who were separated from the male captives, aware of the danger of sexual abuse. But every time he would inquire about their situation, the Abu Sayyaf bandits would punish him. In times of danger and crisis, he was a true shepherd searching for his flock.

The spirit of the law / A6

## Nuncio: 'Forgiveness is the path to new life'



Papal nuncio Archbishop Charles Brown presides over Mass as the University of Santo Tomas (UST) community begins its three-day retreat in honor of the Double Jubilee of St. Thomas Aquinas on March 5, 2024. SCREENSHOT FROM UST VIDEO

CHRISTIANS must let go of grudges and forgive those who have wronged them, as forgiveness embodies the way of Jesus, papal nuncio Archbishop Charles Brown said on March 5.

Speaking during Mass at the University of Santo Tomas (UST)

in Manila, he encouraged those gathered to embrace forgiveness as a fundamental Christian virtue.

"Forgiveness is part of our DNA as Catholics. It's part of what it means to be a Christian and it's really the litmus test of Christianity if we're able to forgive," Brown said in his homily.

He also urged the rejection of the notion "an for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" or "you hit me, I hit you" kind of justice, which according to him, is the total opposite of forgiveness.

"That's not what Christianity is all about. Christianity is something more. It's about God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of our brothers and sisters," Brown said.

"As Christians we need to forgive. Forgiveness is the path to new life. Forgiveness is the way of the Lord Jesus," he said.

The nuncio presided over the Mass on the first of the three-day retreat in honor of the Double Jubilee of St. Thomas Aquinas, which marks the 7th centenary of his canonization and his 750th death anniversary.

Students, academic and support staff, administrators, and alumni filled the UST Quadricentennial Pavilion for the retreat with the theme "Lord, nothing but you: Faith, Hope, and Love in the Heart of St. Thomas." (CBCP News)

## Prelate deplors deaths of 2 Filipino seafarers in Houthi attack

A CATHOLIC maritime agency has deplored the missile strike by Yemen's Houthi rebels on a ship in the Gulf of Aden that killed three seafarers, including two Filipinos.

"We call on the Houthis to stop all the attacks, aggression, and intrusion in the Red Sea," said Bishop Ruperto Santos of Stella Maris - Philippine on March 9.

"This incident underscores the danger to human life, property, and the marine environment in the area," he said.

Aside from the two, there were 13 other Filipinos on board the Liberian-owned, Barbados-flagged ship True Confidence and three of them were

injured in the March 6 attack.

The bishop called for prayers and expressed his condolences to the families of the victims.

"We are one and united with the families of the victims. We urge them to be strong and lift up everyone and everything to God," Santos said.

The Houthis, embroiled in a decade-long civil conflict, claim their attacks oppose Israel's actions in Gaza.

In November last year, 17 Filipino seafarers, who were among the 25 crewmen, were held hostage by the Houthi rebel group after taking over a cargo ship in the southern Red Sea. (CBCP News)



Bishop Ruperto Santos of Stella Maris - Philippines. ANTIPOLO CATHEDRAL

College of Cardinals / A3

means a sure thing that the pope who is chosen in a future conclave will have the same profile as Pope Francis.

### A reform of conclave rules in the offing?

As things stand, the apostolic constitution *Universi Dominici Gregis*, promulgated by John Paul II in 1996, will regulate the conclave. That constitution provided, among other things, that starting from the 34th ballot (or from the 35th, if the vote was also taken on the opening day of the conclave), an absolute majority is enough to elect a pope.

That provision was modified by Benedict XVI in 2007 with the *motu proprio De Aliquibus Mutationibus in Normis de Electione Romani Pontificis*. The new rule provides that at the 34th or 35th ballot, in the event of a "deadlock," a runoff will be held between the two cardinals with the most votes, who, however, will not be able to participate in the ballot. However, the election will take place only if one of the two receives two-thirds of the votes, as expected in all other ballots.

These rules aim to obtain a broad consensus on the elected pope, who can thus count on the support of the entire College of Cardinals.

For some time now, there has been talk of a project by Pope Francis to reform the rules of the conclave. Among the reforms that could be under discussion: the lowering of the quorum for the election of the pope starting from the 15th ballot; the exclusion of cardinals over 80 from the general congregations, i.e. the pre-conclave meetings, in which both voting and nonvoting cardinals participate; and a new structuring of the general congregations themselves, on the model of the last consistory — that is, with the division of the cardinals into working groups and reports entrusted to a moderator.

However, no study for changing the rules of the conclave has been officially announced. Cardinal Gianfranco Ghirlanda, who has become the pope's trusted canon lawyer in recent years, is said to have proposed some draft reforms, but there is no confirmation of this either.

It remains to be seen, therefore, if these rumors about a reform of the conclave's rules are the result of honest discussions or simply agitation and speculation in the face of the well-known unpredictability of Pope Francis.

Rejoice in the truth / A4

lifted up by a cable while joyfully singing Alleluia. She was the one assigned to lift up Our Lady's veil. Unfortunately, the cable got stuck. The angel kept singing, then realized she was hanging in mid-air, and the cable could not move. She began to cry in panic, kicking her legs up and down. The mothers began to shout for help. Finally, the cable got unstuck and the girl, still crying, was finally able to lift the veil of the Blessed Mother. The people began clapping—for the girl and

for the Encuentro of Mother and Son.

Holy Week is the celebration of the Cross, Christ's Passion, Death, and Resurrection, a celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the saving event of humankind. By sin, we sunder our union with God. By Christ's Paschal Mystery, we are once again reunited with God. Hence, to Holy Week we bring an interior attitude of penance and prayer, the joy of redemption, love for our compassionate God, and hope of eternal life and glory.

By the roadside / A5

Francis, for instance, forcefully affirms that in our common home "everything is interconnected" since "human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself" (*Laudato Si'*, no. 66).

In relation to God, Homonhon's defacement through mining, deforestation and the destruction of its watershed vegetation is a total disregard of God's command that man in Eden should "cultivate and preserve it" (*Gen 2:15*). In relation to fellow Homonhonans, present and future generations, anyone responsible for the above evils

disregards his neighbors' welfare and the common good. Whoever does so is an agent not of love but of self-interest. In relation to the earth, Homonhon's ravages from mining and watershed decimation further degrades the environment and contributes to the evils of climate change. Homonhon's land is already mortally scarred and wounded. It is without doubt that the threats to Homonhon's land and watershed are threats to life itself.

Homonhon Island was then, to me, a Paradise Found. Now it is fast becoming a Paradise Lost. And it may not even go viral.

The spirit of the law / A5

Finally, he surrendered, but never to the forces of evil. He surrendered to the hands of God. Accordingly, he was asked to renounce his faith, but he refused. Instead, he stood up for God who was faithful to him until the last drop of his blood. While still in the hands of the rebels, one day, Fr. Rhoel looked so at peace as he told his companions that, after their release, it would be nice to go back to the mountain where they were held captives to have their retreat. But it never happened.

Martyrdom is a gift given to those who are worthy in the eyes of God. It could have happened to any of us who were the young missionaries then, but it was given to Fr. Rhoel because, in hindsight, he was the most prepared to receive the crown. And if there is one reason to celebrate Fr. Rhoel's martyrdom, it is because his life of witness reminds us that our life is worth living if we sacrifice for God's greater glory, suffer the cross of Christ, search the face of God in the most vulnerable and surrender to His will. We may not be given the same gift of martyrdom by shedding our blood, but every single day, we are called to live the prophecy of ordinary life.

In his homily during Fr. Rhoel's funeral mass at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish in Quezon City, the late Basilan Bishop Romulo de la Cruz, D.D., responding to the threat of the Abu Sayyaf to kill him if he

would not uproot the crosses in the island, said that no one could force anyone to remove any cross, even if it meant risking his own life. Since Fr. Rhoel's martyrdom occurred within the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, a booklet was produced as a guide to the Way of the Cross entitled "Crosses Still Stand in Basilan" narrating the experiences of Father Rhoel and his companions in the light of the Gospel.

To honor and perpetuate the memory of the martyr for peace, the Philippine Province of the Claretian Missionaries is now officially called "Fr. Rhoel D. Gallardo Province". Moreover, the cause of his beautification has already been initiated. And so, I find it opportune to end this piece with this prayer for the cause of his martyrdom: "O God, You raise the lowly and reject the proud. We adore You for the life and martyrdom of Fr. Rhoel D. Gallardo, CMF your Servant, who, as a true son of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, embraced sacrifices and rejoiced in torments. Like the Good Shepherd, he protected his flock and remained at the side of the cross of those who suffer, bringing new hope and becoming a martyr for peace. Grant me through his intercession the grace that I humbly ask for, and may Your Servant, Fr. Rhoel D. Gallardo, CMF, be raised to the glory of the altars, through Christ, our Lord." Amen.

Faith journey / A5

to attend to other important matters. We can fast from buying unnecessary things. We can fast from complaining or engaging in gossip. Silence can be therapeutic, especially if talking about other people's faults is becoming a habit. Another form of fasting that we can adopt in this season of Lent is to refrain from doing things that we like to do, but we know will not bring good to our body and soul. Self-awareness in these situations leads us to make wise and enlightened decisions and enables us to take control of our selfish desires.

In his message for Lent this year, Pope Francis invites us to "pause" for prayer and allow the voice of the Lord speaking in the inner recesses of our hearts manifest itself in the concrete love that we can show to others around us. In other words, prayer should lead us to action.

The pope said that "prayer, almsgiving and fasting are not three unrelated acts, but a single movement of openness and self-emptying." Through these practices, we are able to discipline and free

ourselves from the "idols that weigh us down, the attachments that imprison us."

The season of Lent challenges us to be more generous in sharing our time and talents with others. To let go of something, so we can give something to others. Like fasting, almsgiving can take on many forms. It can be in the practice of charitable and kind gestures of acceptance and forgiveness, of refraining from gossip, saying a kind word to another, or going an extra mile to render generous service to someone in the community.

A hoarder's mentality is very prevalent in our society today. It affects all of us in small and big ways, poor and rich alike. There are wealthy people who think nothing else but to increase their wealth. There are politicians whose greed for money, power and position seem unabated, so they make sure every member of the family enter politics so that wealth and power remain within the family. The hoarder's mentality is very true with these people; so they continue to amass

wealth, even at the expense of the poor.

This is a temptation that can afflict anyone else. An honest and probing look into our hearts will show us that we also possess this hoarder's mentality in us, perhaps in varying degrees. We only have to look at our personal things, and acknowledge how much we have acquired through the years, perhaps many of which have not been used, and therefore we do not really need. In contrast, so many poor people around us have less, or, in some circumstances, not even have the necessities in life.

The Lenten season calls us to a change of heart, to a sincere conversion from our old ways to a renewed life, of growing in our relationship with the Lord and with one another. God invites us to come to him with our whole being, mind, will and heart. As we embark on this 40-day journey towards Easter, let us ask God to enfold us with his mercy so that we may be renewed and transformed in his love.

## Negros bishop launches peace prayer



Bishop Gerardo Alminaza leads the blessing of the icon image of "Reyna sang Paghidaet" (Queen of Peace) during Mass for the 7th General Assembly of the Philippine Misereor Partnership Inc at Acacia Convention Center in Bacolod City on March 6, 2024. CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

THE central Philippine diocese of San Carlos has released a "peace prayer" following sporadic clashes between state forces and

suspected rebels in the hinterland of Escalante City in Negros Occidental.

The recent military offensive ago reportedly did airstrikes

against alleged members of the New People's Army in Sitio Mandulao of Barangay Pinapugasan, which is part of the parish of Dian-ay, displacing several families.

Bishop Gerardo Alminaza of San Carlos on March 6 said the prayer is their "own contribution to the ongoing struggle for integral peace."

"Let us work and pray for peace, let there be a nonviolent revolution for peace," Alminaza said during Mass, with Bishop Cosme Damian of Butuan and Bishop Broderick Paballo of Taytay as concelebrants.

The liturgy marked the last day of the Philippine Misereor Partnership Inc. 7th General Assembly held in Bacolod City.

The diocese, human rights advocates, and civil society

organizations continue to appeal for the resumption of peace talks between the government and the communist rebels.

Alminaza also led the blessing of the image of "Reyna Sang Paghidaet" (Queen of Peace), the patroness of the Dian-ay parish, with the Baybayin script reading "paghidaet," the Hiligaynon word for integral peace.

In the icon, Mary is depicted praying with the symbol of peace and bearing a bullet wound, "to remind us of the importance of ending the continued killings and bloodbath in the Philippines," he said.

The Blessed Mother also appears in tears "for all the victims of violence and injustice," he added.

The symbol of the "Tree of Life" also appears on the side, to represent "our oneness with creation and with the Creator; connecting our response to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor."

"As a Church community, we endeavour to respond to the victims of ecological and social injustice," Alminaza said.

The Peace Prayer of the icon of "Reyna sa Paghidaet" (Queen of Peace) reads as follows:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace:  
let there be food for all,  
let there be an end to wars,  
let there be equality,  
let there be justice,  
let there be love.  
Lord, form us to be artisans

of your peace:  
to value solidarity built on human fraternity,  
to foster the common good shaped by concern for all,  
to pursue peace fostered by justice,  
to protect nature rooted in the culture of care,  
to uplift the poor nurtured by authentic charity.  
Lord, let peace be our prayer:  
that there will be an end to killings and violence,  
that there will be harmony among religions,  
that there will be unity among societies,  
that there will be peace among us.

Amen.

(CBCP News)

## Dumaguete bishop urges justice one year after Pamplona massacre



Bishop Julito Cortes of Dumaguete. DUMAGUETE CATHEDRAL/FACEBOOK

THE families of people killed in the so-called Pamplona massacre are still awaiting justice one year on, a Catholic bishop said.

Bishop Julito Cortes of Dumaguete said that while some suspects may have been arrested and cases filed, "the resolution is not yet in sight".

"And what have been done so far are not enough to quench our thirst for lasting peace," Cortes said in a statement on March 4.

The massacre refers to the killing of 10 people including the former Negros Oriental Gov. Roel Degamo on March 4, 2023.

Degamo was distributing aid inside his home in Pamplona town when armed men entered and shot him and nine others.

"Where are we now in our

pursuit of justice and peace for our beloved province?" Cortes asked.

He said that, as far as the victims' families are concerned, they "continue to cry for true justice" and "are troubled by fear, division, and confusion."

The bishop also exhorted the faithful to pray for the strength of the bereaved families, for the healing of other victims, and for the conversion of hearts of perpetrators and masterminds.

"Let us renew our support for and appeal to local and national government authorities to continue working for the full resolution of this case, that truth, justice, and genuine peace may reign again this year in Negros Oriental," he said. (CBCP News)

Rifle / A1

acceptable if the country is in a state of war.

"(But) we are not in a state of war," stressed Florencio, who is also the chairman of the CBCP Episcopal Commission on Prison Pastoral Care.

The Philippine National Police earlier made a slight amendment

in the implementing rules and regulations (IRR) of Republic Act 10591, or the Comprehensive Law in Firearms and Ammunition.

The amendment permits civilians to own and possess long firearms, but restricted to those not exceeding 7.62mm. (CBCP News)

Study groups / A3

the bishops, nature and course of ad limina apostolorum visits) from a missionary synodal perspective.  
8. The role of papal representatives in a missionary synodal perspective.  
9. Theological criteria and synodal methodologies for shared discernment of controversial doctrinal, pastoral, and ethical issues.  
10. The reception of the fruits of the ecumenical journey in ecclesial practices.

These selected themes were among a more extensive list of topics deemed "matters of great relevance" that came up during the synod's first session in October 2023 that required consideration "at the level of the whole Church and in collaboration with the dicasteries of the Roman Curia," according to the Dec. 12, 2023, document from the synod's general

secretariat titled "Towards October 2024."

Observing that these issues require extensive review, Pope Francis noted that there is inadequate time to fully address them ahead of the synod in October. Therefore, he said, "the study groups will offer an initial account of their activity on the occasion of the second session and, if possible, will conclude their mandate by the month of June 2025."

The pope said "it is the task of the General Secretariat of the Synod, by joint agreement with the competent dicasteries of the Roman Curia, to constitute these groups, calling pastors and experts from all continents to take part in them, and taking into consideration not only existing studies but also the most relevant current experiences in the people of God gathered in the local Churches."

Pope / A1

The pages cover his time spent in Cordoba, leading to the Pope's reflection on mistakes "made because of my authoritarian attitude, to the extent of being accused of being ultraconservative. It was a period of purification. I was very closed in myself, a bit depressed."

### Relationship with Pope Benedict XVI

The resignation of Pope Benedict XVI, the subsequent conclave, and his election as Pope, with the choice of the name Francis, are another chapter in the autobiography.

Pope Francis described his pain at seeing "the figure of the Pope Emeritus 'instrumentalized,' with ideological and political purposes by unscrupulous people," and the consequent "controversies" that "in ten years have not been lacking and have hurt both of us."

"Life. My Story in History" covers the period of the pandemic, recalls appeals about the wealth of cultures and differences of peoples inherent in the European Union. He expressed his hope that such an appeal will be heard by

Bohol / A1

the resort.

The 57-year-old bishop called on the faithful to take "pro-active" steps in safeguarding the environment.

He said these may be done through conservation efforts, sustainable practices, or advocating for policies that prioritize environmental protection.

"Together, we can make a meaningful impact and ensure a harmonious coexistence with nature," Uy said.

The National Geographic in 2016 listed the Chocolate Hills among 19 of the most wild and beautiful places in the world, describing it as "a mystery of nature."

In 2023, Bohol was recognized as the Philippines' first global geopark by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (CBCP News)

Hungarian Prime Minister Orban, "so that he understands that there is always so much need for unity," as well as from Brussels "which seems to want to standardize everything, which should respect Hungarian uniqueness."

In the book, Pope Francis touched on topics dear to him, such as the protection of creation, and addressed young people, asking them to "make noise," because "time is running out, we don't have much left to save the planet."

The Church that Pope Francis imagines is a "mother Church, which embraces and welcomes everyone, even those who feel wrong and who have been judged by us in the past," thinking of homosexuals or transsexuals "who seek the Lord and have instead been rejected or expelled."

The Pope repeated his yes to "blessings for irregular couples," because everyone is loved by God, "especially sinners. And if some brother bishops decide not to follow this path, it does not mean that this is the antechamber of a schism, because the doctrine of the Church is not questioned."

Quiboloy / A1

justice for the alleged victims of human trafficking, sexual abuse, and other criminal activities involving Quiboloy and his church, the "Kingdom of Jesus Christ".

"We call on Congress, particularly the Senate, to remain steadfast in its pursuit of truth and justice," the national Caritas said.

A Senate committee on Tuesday ordered the arrest of Quiboloy after he again failed to show up for testimony before lawmakers.

Some senators, however, have stood up for the controversial pastor and are opposing the issuance of the contempt order against him.

The church agency urged the Senate to uphold the rule of

### Homosexuality and civil unions

While homosexual marriage remains impossible, he said, this is not the case for civil unions, because "it is right that these people who live the gift of love can have legal coverage like everyone else."

As in other moments, Pope Francis's words are an encouragement to make people who are often marginalized within the Church feel at home, "especially those who have received baptism and are in all respects part of the people of God. And those who have not received baptism and wish to receive it, or who wish to act as godfathers or godmothers, please, let them be welcomed."

The Pope did not hide the wounds caused by those who believe he "is destroying the papacy."

Even if there is "always someone trying to hinder reform, who would like to remain stuck in the times of the Pope-king," he said, the fact remains that "the Vatican is the last absolute monarchy in Europe, and that often inside here, reasoning and court maneuvers are made, but these schemes must be definitively abandoned."

law "and ensure that everyone, regardless of their status or influence, is held accountable for their actions."

The Caritas earlier appealed to Quiboloy to submit himself to the Senate inquiry and any other legitimate investigations.

"This is not about silencing him or denying him his rights; it is about ensuring that all voices are heard and that the truth prevails," it added.

"We also urge all Filipinos to stand together in upholding the dignity of every human person and ensuring that the scales of justice tip in favor of the vulnerable and the voiceless, not the powerful and the privileged," it also said. (CBCP News)

in the horizon of communion and mission ... in its theological meaning, in the practical ways of setting it in motion, and in the reality of canonical structures."

The document also outlined the intermediary steps that are to be taken in the upcoming months in preparation for the synod, noting that this process will be built upon a "new consultation process," articulating this will unfold on three distinct levels: the local Church, the groupings of Churches (i.e. national, regional, continental), and on the universal level.

The second document is titled "Study Groups on Questions Arising in the First Session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to Deepen in Collaboration with the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia."

It is the second document that

specifies that theme No. 5 — regarding matters related to ministerial forms — "is the context in which the question on the possible access of women to the diaconate can be appropriately posed."

The study group formed to examine this question will be under the direction of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, the document notes. This group "is entrusted with the task of continuing "theological and pastoral research on the access of women to the diaconate, taking advantage of the results of the commissions specially established by the Holy Father."

The group's work "will also aim to respond to the desire expressed by the Synodal Assembly for 'a greater recognition and appreciation of the contribution of women and a growth in the pastoral responsibilities entrusted to them in all areas of the life and mission of the Church."

## New Alaminos bishop to build his ministry on mercy



Bishop-elect Napoleon Sipalay of Alaminos imparts his blessing to the faithful after his episcopal ordination at the Minor Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary of Manaoag in Pangasinan province on March 18, 2024. **ROY LAGARDE**

ALAMINOS' new shepherd was ordained to the episcopate on March 18 and gave insight into what he finds important and inspiring: compassion, love and mercy.

"It has shaped me, it will continue to guide me, especially in this new mission," said Bishop-elect Napoleon Sipalay of Alaminos.

Around a thousand people came to the Minor Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary of Manaoag in Pangasinan

province to witness the episcopal ordination of Alaminos' fifth bishop.

Serving as the principal ordaining bishop was Archbishop Socrates Villegas of Lingayen-Dagupan, with Bishop Jose Jacinto of Urdaneta and Auxiliary Bishop Fidelis Layog as co-consecrators.

Over 200 priests, 37 bishops, and one abbot processed into the cathedral for the start of the Mass.

Pope Francis on Jan. 28 named

the Dominican priest as the new bishop of the Alaminos, succeeding Archbishop Ricardo Bacay who has been assigned to Tuguegarao in 2019.

During the four-year "sede vacante" period, the diocese was administered by Layog as apostolic administrator.

Sipalay is the third Filipino Dominican to be elevated to the episcopate.

The last Filipino Dominican to be ordained bishop was the late Bishop Jose Salazar in 1996. It has also been 10 years since the passing of the first Filipino Dominican Archbishop Leonardo Legaspi.

The new bishop chose "Misericordiam Dei et Vestram," which is Latin for "God's Mercy and Yours" for his episcopal motto.

"I will strive to embody the love and mercy I have received. I will cooperate with this grace allowing it to strengthen not just for myself but all within the diocese especially those most in need," he said.

Sipalay will take canonical possession of the Diocese of Alaminos on Tuesday, March 18, during the installation ceremony that will be held at St. Joseph Cathedral. **(CBCP News)**



Auxiliary Bishop Efrén Esmilla of Philadelphia after his episcopal ordination at the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul on March 7, 2024. **ARCHDIOCESE OF PHILADELPHIA**

## Church ordains fourth Pinoy bishop in US

By **ROY LAGARDE**

A CATHOLIC priest of Filipino descent was ordained auxiliary bishop of Philadelphia in a solemn ceremony at the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul on March 7.

Bishop Efrén Esmilla, 61, was ordained to the episcopate with two other new auxiliary bishops—Keith Chylinski, and Christopher Cooke.

As auxiliary bishops, they will assist Archbishop Nelson Perez in the pastoral care of the archdiocese, one of the largest in the nation with approximately 1.5 million members.

The ordinations took place nearly three months after Pope Francis appointed the Philadelphia priests to the episcopate.

In his homily, Lopez briefly discussed what he called the "job description" of a bishop: to lead, to encourage at times, but most of the time to walk in the midst of his people.

"The bishop at times walks in front of his people—leading. Sometimes the bishop walks behind the people—pushing them. And most of the time, he is called to be in the midst of his people," he said.

"Do those things with a peaceful and a joyful heart," the archbishop added.

Cardinal Christophe Pierre, Apostolic Nuncio to the United States of America, reminded the new bishops of the "four forms of closeness" that Pope Francis considers fundamental to the life of a priest: closeness to God, to bishops, to priests, and to the flock.

"I know that you will continue to exercise the kind of closeness of which the pope speaks..." Pierre

said. "Take courage in knowing that you have been prepared well for this new ministry."

With his episcopal motto "Sicut qui ministrat" (As one who serves), Esmilla stressed that "service must be rooted in compassion because it connects our good works to the fabric of our soul."

"My journey is not yet over just yet. Today marks a new phase and it is one I accept," Esmilla said. "I hope you'll join me in being pilgrims of hope and joy..."

"I am humbled by the trust you have placed in me. I will strive to be worthy of it everyday," he added.

During the Mass, which lasted three hours, songs were sung in English, Spanish, and Filipino.

Around 20 bishops also concelebrated, including the first Filipino bishop in the US, Oscar Solis of Salt Lake City, and Bishop Mylo Hubert Vergara of Pasig, as well as the apostolic administrator of San Pablo diocese in Laguna.

Esmilla was born and raised in Laguna province's Nagcarlan town. He completed a bachelor's degree at San Beda University in Manila before migrating to the US in 1987.

He took his priestly formation at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Wynnewood, Pennsylvania, where he also earned a master of divinity in 1992.

Esmilla was ordained priest for the Philadelphia archdiocese on May 15, 1993.

Prior to his appointment as bishop, he was serving as a pastor of St. James Parish in Elkins Park and Saint Martin of Tours in Philadelphia.

Esmilla is the fourth Filipino Bishop in the US. The second is Auxiliary Bishop Alex Aklan of Los Angeles, and the third is Auxiliary Bishop Anthony Celino of El Paso, Texas.

## Bishop-elect Occiano ordination, installation date set



Bishop-elect Luisito Occiano of Virac.

FATHER Luisito Occiano, who has been appointed by Pope Francis as the new bishop of Virac, will officially assume his new role on June 26.

Occiano, 52, will be installed as

Virac's third bishop five days after his episcopal ordination at the Peñafrancia Basilica Minore in Naga City on June 21 at 9 a.m.

Archbishop Emeritus Rolando Tria

Tirona of Caceres will ordain the priest to the episcopate, with Archbishop Charles Brown, apostolic nuncio to the Philippines, and Archbishop Adolfo Tito Yllana, apostolic nuncio to Israel and Cyprus, serving as co-consecrators.

In Virac, he will be installed to his seat in the Immaculate Conception Cathedral by Archbishop-elect Rex Andrew Alarcon, who is also scheduled to assume leadership of the Caceres archdiocese on May 2.

Occiano's appointment as bishop was announced by the Vatican on February 29. He will succeed retired Bishop Manolo de los Santos, who served the Virac diocese for around 29 years.

In the interim, the pope also appointed De los Santos as the diocese's apostolic administrator of Virac until the installation of Occiano. **(CBCP News)**

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

## Surigao bishop marks 25 years, shares his secret to happiness

ON a scale of one to 10, how happy are you?

A Catholic bishop claimed to have discovered the secret to being happy at all times, regardless of the situation.

Bishop Antonieto Cabajog of the Surigao diocese was honored on March 12 with a thanksgiving Mass celebrating the silver jubilee of his episcopal ordination.

After clocking 67 years of age, 43 years in priesthood, 25 years in the episcopate, Cabajog admitted his life as a bishop "is not easy."

"There are ups and downs. There are moments of sadness and loneliness," Cabajog said at the start of the Mass at the San Nicolas de Tolentino Cathedral in Surigao City.

"Am I happy? Yes, of course!" he asserted. "Do you want to know my



Bishop Antonieto Cabajog of Surigao celebrates the 25th anniversary of his episcopal ordination at the San Nicolas de Tolentino Cathedral in Surigao City on March 12, 2024. **SAMMY NAVAJA**

secret? It is simple: give, share."

One key to happiness, according to him, is helping others as much as possible.

He said people who are generous are happy because they are rich in everything: "rich in love, rich in friends, rich in help, and rich towards God."

"As a priest and bishop my life and ministry are God's gift that must be shared to all," the prelate said.

The celebration packed the cathedral with hundreds of lay faithful, dozens of priests and consecrated persons, including about 40 bishops.

Among those present were Cardinal Jose Advincula of Manila, who presided the Mass; Archbishop Charles Brown, the apostolic nuncio to the Philippines; and Archbishop

Bernardito Auza, the apostolic nuncio to Spain and Andorra.

In his homily, Auza commended Cabajog for his 25 years of "faithful ministry" and "dedicated service to the people of God and Surigao."

Ordained priest for the Tagbilaran diocese in 1981, Cabajog served as assistant secretary general of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) from 1990 to 1994.

In 1999, he was appointed auxiliary bishop of Cebu, a post served for only around two years. He has been serving as Surigao bishop since 2001.

The bishop also previously served as chairman of the CBCP Episcopal Commission on Canon Law and the Commission on Vocation. **(CBCP News)**

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

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# Pastoral Concerns



Pope Francis with the participants of the international conference "Women in the Church: Builders of Humanity" at the Vatican on March 7, 2024. VATICAN MEDIA

## 'Women in the Church: Builders of humanity'

Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the participants in the International Conference "Women in the Church: Building of Humanity"; at the Clementine Hall, 7 March 2024.

DEAR brothers and sisters, good morning!

I offer a cordial greeting to all of you who have come from various countries to take part in the Conference Women in the Church: Builders of humanity. I thank you for your presence and for organizing and promoting this event.

Your Conference highlights in particular the witness of holiness of ten women. I would like to mention them by name: Josephine Bakhita, Magdeleine de Jesus, Elizabeth Ann Seton, Mary MacKillop, Laura Montoya, Kateri Tekakwitha, Teresa of Calcutta, Rafqa Pietra Choboq Ar-Rayès, Maria Beltrame Quattrocchi and Daphrose Mukasanga.

All these women, at different times and in different cultures, each in her own distinct way, gave proof through initiatives of charity, education and prayer, of how the "feminine genius" can uniquely reflect God's holiness in the midst of our world. Indeed, precisely at times in history when women were largely excluded from social and ecclesial life, the "Holy Spirit raised up saints whose attractiveness produced new spiritual vigour and important reforms in the Church". Here too, "I think of all those unknown or forgotten women who, each

in her own way, sustained and transformed families and communities by the power of their witness" (Gaudete et Exsultate, 12). The Church needs to keep this in mind, because the Church is herself a woman: a daughter, a bride and a mother. And who better than women can reveal her face? Let us help one another, putting aside any aggressive and divisive attitudes, and exercising careful discernment, to discover, in docility to the voice of the Spirit and in faithful communion, fitting ways for the grandeur and the place of women to be increasingly valued in the People of God.

You have chosen an eloquent title for your Conference in referring to women as "Builders of Humanity". This expression brings out even more clearly the nature of women's vocation as "builders", cooperating with the Creator in the service of life, the common good, and peace. I would like to emphasize two aspects of this mission, dealing with style and with education.

First of all, style. Ours is a time seared by hatred, in which our human family, which needs to feel the power of love, is instead frequently scarred by violence, war and ideologies that stifle the noblest feelings of the human heart. Precisely in this context, the contribution

of women is more necessary than ever. For women know how to bring people together with tenderness. Saint Therese of the Child Jesus said that she wanted to be love in the Church. She was right: women, in fact, with their unique capacity for compassion, their intuitiveness and their connatural inclination to "care", are able, in an outstanding way, to be for society both "intelligence and a heart that loves and unites", to bring love where love is lacking, and humanity where human beings are searching to find their true identity.

Secondly, education. You have organized this Conference in cooperation with various Catholic academic institutions. In the context of pastoral care within university communities, in addition to the academic study of the Church's doctrine and social teaching, every effort to present students with testimonies of holiness, especially of feminine sanctity, can encourage them to aim higher, to broaden the horizons of their dreams and their ways of thinking, and to aim to pursue high ideals. Holiness can thus become a cross-disciplinary educational path within the greater pursuit of knowledge. For this reason, I express my hope that your educational settings, in

addition to being places of study, research and learning, places of "information", will also be places of "formation", where minds and hearts are opened to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. That is why it is important to make the saints better known, especially women saints, in all the depth and reality of their humanity. In this way, education will be increasingly capable of touching each person in his or her wholeness and uniqueness.

A final word about education: in a world where women still suffer so greatly from violence, inequality, injustice and mistreatment – something scandalous and all the more so for those who profess faith in the God "born of woman" (Gal 4:4) – one serious form of discrimination has to do precisely with the education of women. In certain contexts it is a cause of fear, yet the way to the betterment of societies is through the education of girls and young women, which benefits overall human development. Let us pray for this and commit ourselves to this!

Dear sisters and brothers, I entrust the fruits of your Conference to the Lord and I accompany you with my blessing. And I ask you, please, not to forget to pray for me. Thank you.



Towards the  
**JUBILEE 2025**  
<https://www.iubilaeum2025.va>

(Second 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.

IN the latest Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) last January, a motion to petition the Holy See to erect a Personal Prelature for Filipino Migrants 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 realized that we still need to do a lot of explaining in order to dispel 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 Part I of this article, we considered the more serious misconceptions and objections to this proposal and tried to give as concise an answer as possible in every case. In this concluding part, we shall tackle the most common reasons why this move had been kept in the backburner for more than a decade—i.e., the doubt regarding a real need to do more than what is already being done for the OFWs, the feasibility of embarking on such a project, and most of all some misconceptions regarding Personal Prelatures.

### The need for a specialized pastoral care for Filipino migrants: Immigrants and OFWs

If they were in the armed forces, the roughly two million Filipino Immigrants, who have stably settled in their new countries, would be like infantry who form part of the occupying forces; on the other hand, the eight million Filipino Migrant Workers—also known as Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs)—on temporary employment contracts would be like marines who land on beaches to pave the way for the occupying forces. The training and skill sets for each group are distinct from each other. So are the training and skill sets for their commanding officers different.

The Filipino Immigrants are in their new countries for the long haul; many acquire citizenship or permanent residence visas in those countries. Hence, they should not be allowed to form cysts within the body of the local churches where they reside. While Filipino chaplains would be helpful to take better care of them—given their cultural background and religious traditions—it would be extremely detrimental for them not to be guided towards full incorporation in their new parishes and dioceses. This would be inevitable in the case of an Ordinariate for Filipino Migrants, since an ordinariate constitutes its own portion of the people of God, exempt from other portions (e.g., the territorial circumscription). On the other hand, a Clerical Institute in charge of Filipino Migrants may not have the mindset of secularity—i.e., of forming part of the local parish or particular church (diocese).

Hence, the proposal for a Personal Prelature for Filipino Migrants (PPFM), because a Personal Prelature is the apt juridical configuration for a non-territorial ecclesiastical circumscription with cumulative jurisdiction with respect to the territorial circumscription where it is working. Each Personal Prelature is configured by Statutes established by the Holy See, after due consultation with the territorial circumscriptions where the Prelature would operate, tailored to its specific finality. Thus, while dedicating themselves to minister to their Filipino flock, with their peculiar cultural heritage whenever convenient, they nevertheless will always observe all the indications of the Local Ordinary as regards the faithful of the diocese—to which



The Gwangju Filipino Catholic Community during Mass on March 31, 2024. GFCC/FACEBOOK

the Filipino immigrants belong—facilitating their full incorporation into that particular church in the shortest time possible (e.g., a generation or two).

This last point is important, because the opposite phenomenon has been observed in countries of long Christian tradition and well-developed territorial jurisdictions. In Italy, for example, it is not uncommon that even 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Filipinos—who are already more Italian than Filipino—are still treated by the local clergy as immigrants, albeit very well to be sure. The fact that Filipinos tend to congregate with other Filipinos is exacerbated by the lack of a clear mindset towards full incorporation on the part of most Filipino chaplains. Hence, a cycle of *immigrant ghetto mentality* is perpetuated needlessly. What is needed is a specific clergy—that of the Personal Prelature for Filipino Migrants—who are specifically formed with that mindset.

However, the Chaplains of the Prelature will really play a decisive role in the case of the OFWs, who are on temporary employment all over the world, but more especially in those places where the territorial ecclesiastical circumscription is either non-existent or is sorely undermanned—e.g., the Middle East and certain places of Asia. In such places, the Chaplains of the Personal Prelature will be providing not only the special pastoral care proper to Filipino migrants, but also the ordinary pastoral care that is proper of any faithful of the Church. In other words, they shall be supplying the shortage of the local clergy, who are already undermanned to provide the ordinary pastoral care to their stable resident faithful and additionally have to take care of the hundreds of thousands of OFWs whose numbers are many times more than the resident faithful.

### The crucial formation and governance of the clergy for Filipino migrants

If the Filipino Migrants can be likened to occupying infantry forces and the OFWs likened to marines securing a beach head, the chaplains of the Personal Prelature can be likened to Navy seals or Delta forces of the army. They should not only be stable in their priesthood (to withstand overseas deployment) but should also be zealous in taking care of their itinerant flock. Such peculiar pastoral care is the very reason of the Personal Prelature: providing

even the ordinary pastoral care in those areas where the territorial circumscriptions are either absent or undermanned, but most of all providing spiritual guidance so: (1) the Filipino Immigrants are effectively integrated into their new dioceses and parishes; (2) the OFWs withstand the rigors of loneliness, family (specially spousal) separation, cultural adjustment, tough working conditions, temptations due to the threefold concupiscence; (3) in one or the other case, that the Filipino Migrants realize their full potential as messengers of the Gospel all over the world.

The peculiarity of the pastoral care of OFWs cannot be over-emphasized. The challenges of adopting to the new culture, of being integrated to the local diocese and parishes, of being away from their loved ones (especially for their spouses), of being confronted by Christian sects and other religions (sometimes aggressively proselytistic) have to be met squarely. On top of all these challenges is the one posed by Pope Francis for the Filipino migrants to be agents of the New Evangelization. All of these comprise the special pastoral care that the Filipino Migrants and OFWs have to be provided with. On top of the ordinary pastoral care that they deserve as ordinary faithful—like their compatriots in the Philippines who are benefitting from their heroic sacrifice in foreign soil to send home crucial dollar remittances that constitute the backbone of the Philippine economy—the OFWs need a more intense spiritual companionship, simply because they are subjected to greater challenges to their faith, their morality and even their sanity.

For this, the Chaplains of the Personal Prelature are the first ones who need special formation to be effective shepherds of such an itinerant flock. Eventually, this shall be the job of the Seminary for the Personal Prelature that the Prelate should eventually establish. However, even before such a seminary can be set up, the chaplains who shall join the Prelature by adscription will need extensive retooling to imbibe the mission of the Prelature. Even beyond the seminary, it shall be the primordial task of the Prelature to give its clergy—whether by incardination or by adscription—an effective ongoing formation. Hence, the need for a jurisdictional bond between the chaplains and the Prelature, beyond the bond of

goodwill that volunteer chaplains might be willing to have with a non-jurisdictional entity—e.g., the Episcopal Commission for Migrants and Itinerant People (ECMI).

A Personal Prelature for Filipino Migrants (both for Immigrants and OFWs) would be jurisdictional in nature, such that the chaplains will be bonded to it either by incardination or by adscription. On the other hand, the Prelate shall be the Ordinary of the Personal Prelature, giving it his undivided pastoral attention as his own itinerant flock.

### The feasibility of a Personal Prelature for Filipino Migrants

A final consideration is the feasibility of establishing a Personal Prelature for Filipino Migrants—i.e., in terms of manpower, physical and financial resources. A quick answer could be scriptural: *Inter medium montium pertransibunt aquae*, between the mountains the waters shall pass! If it is for the good of souls, Divine Providence shall make it possible. Nevertheless, prudence dictates that we make some human calculations as well.

In terms of manpower, the erection of a Personal Prelature for Filipino Migrants will initially not entail such a huge investment of clergy and dedicated laity. Initially it would entail a reconfiguration of the bonds that bind the chaplains to their ministry towards Filipino migrants—from one of volunteerism to one of ecclesiastical jurisdiction, from one of the binding capacity of goodwill to that of bonds of justice and obedience. As for the involvement of the laity in the work of this Prelature, it would seem like there is no shortage of covenanted communities who are already ministering to the Filipino Migrants; it is just a matter of harnessing them in a more hierarchical way, through bonds of organic cooperation with the clergy of the Prelature according to c.296 of the Code of Canon Law.

As for the physical requirements, the minimum requirement for the erection of a Personal Prelature is a site for its seat. Providentially, the Archdiocese of Manila has already offered the *Shrine of Jesus, the Way, the Truth, and Life* for the use of the Personal Prelature as its proposed Prelatic Church.

As for the financial requirements, without formally resorting to tithing, the very fact that the Personal Prelature would be

ministering to about 10 Million Filipino Migrants who are in fact remitting P30 Billion annually to the Philippine economy gives an idea of the financial resources that this Personal Prelature will have.

### Conclusion

Perhaps at this point it may already be a question of justice to the Filipino Migrants, who have the divine right in law to receive proper pastoral care. The Church is always vocal when it comes to social justice, also within the Church. This right can indeed be upheld more effectively, especially since the Church has had the adequate juridical figure of Personal Prelatures, just waiting to be applied.

The Filipino Migrants may very well ask why there is a circumscription with an Ordinary to provide the pastoral care for the hundreds of thousands of military men and women and their families, but none for the 10 million Filipino Migrants and their families.

The Filipino Migrants may also point out that the Philippine Government has clearly realized that it could serve the Filipino migrants more effectively through a structure that coordinates efforts in their favor. Thus, on December 2021 it created the Department of Migrant Workers—which consolidates under one agency the key services for overseas Filipino workers offered by: OWWA, DOLE (overseas offices, International Labor Affairs Bureau, National Maritime Polytechnic), the Department of Foreign Affairs Undersecretary for Migrant Workers' Affairs, and the Department of Social Welfare and Development's International Social Services Office.

In like manner, for the Church, a Personal Prelature for Filipino Migrants would coordinate or collaborate with services for migrants abroad offered by the CBCP; agreements among bishops; priests and religious; covenanted communities; Government and private sectors; and even civic, cultural and academic organizations, including alumni associations. All these can be done in an agile manner, through a networking that covers the whole world.

It is time for the Church to step up in its care for the Filipino Migrants, the same way that the Philippine Government has, especially of late. It is not a matter of charity alone; it is a matter of justice.



The participants of the 40th Ecumenical Meeting of Bishops Friends of the Focolare Movement in Augsburg, Germany. PHOTO FROM FOCOLARE/WILHELM KRAUTWASCHL

## Ecumenical fellowship in Augsburg

By ARCHBISHOP ANTONIO J. LEDESMA, SJ

"DARE to Be One—A call from Jesus to live the future, now" was the theme and substance of the 40th Ecumenical Meeting of Bishops Friends of the Focolare Movement in the historic city of Augsburg, Germany on February 27 - March 1, 2024.

There were 60 participants from 26 nations, representing 29 Christian churches. These belonged to the great families of Christian churches: Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, Evangelicals, Anglicans, Methodists, and Catholics of the Latin, Armenian and Reformed, Evangelicals, Anglicans, Methodists, and Catholics of the Latin, Armenian and Byzantine rites. Religious leaders, including two women bishops, came from the continents of Europe, Africa, Latin America, North America, Asia, Australia and the Middle East.

Participants from the Philippines included: Bishop Mel Rey Uy, Chair of the Episcopal Commission on Ecumenical Affairs; Bishop Socrates Mesiona and Methodist Bishop Roger Marquez of Puerto Princesa; Bishop Reuel Marigza, Executive Secretary of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines; Bishop-Emeritus Antonio Tobias, former ECEA Chair; Bishop Antonio Ablon of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente; and myself, Archbishop-Emeritus of Cagayan de Oro.

We shared our own experience of issuing a Joint Statement, "One Ecumenical Family", approved by the major federations of Christian churches on the 500th anniversary of Christianity in the Philippines in 2021.

Following the Focolare Spirituality of Unity, the panel discussions in the forum dwelt on three main themes: (1) "Receptive Ecumenism," that welcomes other church traditions,

and is closely related to the ongoing synodal process of listening and learning from each other; (2) "The Call to Mission" and to collectively witness to the Gospel and love of Christ in a conflict-ridden world yearning for peace; and (3) "Jesus Forsaken" on the Cross, a spirituality for facing the darkness of the world, leading towards Hope in the Resurrection and a renewed society.

There were also liturgical moments of celebration: an Orthodox Evening Prayer, an Anglican Eucharist, and a Catholic Mass. These highlighted the common worship of the ecumenical group, but also the respectful acknowledgment of the existing differences in the reception of the Eucharist.

Augsburg in the Bavarian region of southern Germany, was the imperial city steeped in the history of the Reformation. In 1518, a year after his public protest, Martin Luther, the Augustinian monk and Professor of Sacred Scriptures at the University of Wittenberg, had a discussion with Roman Cardinal Caetano about his 95 theses on indulgences. There was no agreement, and Luther fled the city during the night for fear of his life. In 1530, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V convened the Diet of Augsburg with the intention of reuniting Protestants and Catholics. It was there that Philip Melancthon, a theologian friend of Luther, presented the Augsburg Confession, intended for reconciling Lutheran principles with Catholic beliefs. The efforts from both sides failed.

In 1555, in another Diet, the Peace of Augsburg was signed which brought about the nonviolent coexistence of Catholic and Lutheran communities. Each Prince of the Holy Roman Empire was free to determine the confession of those living within his territory,

following the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose realm, his religion). Other occupants who did not agree with the declared religion were free to move to other regions of the empire.

In 1650, after the destructive Thirty Years' War (1618-48) was ended by the Treaty of Westphalia, and freedom of religion for everyone was ensured, Augsburg started celebrating the Festival of Peace every 8th of August up to the present. (This is reminiscent of our celebration of a Mindanao Week of Peace starting every last November of the year.)

One highlight of the conference was the Ecumenical Prayer Service at St. Anna Church in Augsburg, where in 1999, 25 years ago, the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church signed the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification." This document states that the churches now share "a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ." It resolves the 500-year-old conflict over the nature of justification and good works which was the root cause of the Protestant Reformation. Subsequently, the declaration also received the accession of three other World Communions: Methodist, Reformed and Anglican.

Another highlight of the gathering was the visit to Ottmaring, the Focolare Ecumenical Little Town, where the bishops signed the Pact of Mutual Love as a commitment towards mutual understanding and the development of an ecumenical network through online events and newsletters. Likewise, the creation of a widespread ecumenical network involving about 300 Movements and various Churches, called "Together for Europe," was presented to preserve the common

Christian heritage of the continent.

After the conference proper, the visit to the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site provided an antithetical image of what Ecumenism stands for—particularly, the site of Barracks 26 where dissident pastors, priests, rabbis, including four bishops were lodged and subject to the same forced labor and eventual extermination of many of the imprisoned in the camp. At the rear side of the camp, a Carmelite monastery now houses a community of nuns offering perpetual prayers for reconciliation. The monastery was initiated in the 1960's by an auxiliary bishop of Augsburg who had also been detained in Dachau.

Two other icons struck me in my visit to Augsburg churches. The first was the original painting of "Mother Mary undoing the knots" in the ancient church of 'St. Peter am Perlach.' Pope Francis has helped popularize this 17th century painting by appealing to Mary straightening the many knots in our lives.

The other icon was the full-length statue of St. Peter Canisius on one of the pillars of the Augsburg Cathedral. Canisius was the first Provincial of the Jesuits in Germany and was known as the "second apostle of Germany" due to his popularized catechisms that won back many to the Catholic fold. This came to be known as the Counter-Reformation. But what was distinctive in his approach was his non-polemical style of befriending foes and explaining the Faith in simple terms—what would be called today a dialogue in theological understanding.

And was this not the same spirit of Christian fellowship that pervaded the Focolare ecumenical gathering in Augsburg this year?

# Making the Church an increasingly safe place for minors and vulnerable adults

Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the members of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors; held at the Hall of Pope, 7 March 2024

DEAR brothers and sisters!

I am pleased to welcome you on the occasion of your Plenary Assembly. I offer you my heartfelt thanks for your very important work, and for your personal and collective witness.

Many of you have dedicated your lives to caring for victims of abuse, a courageous vocation that comes from the heart of the Church and helps her to be purified and to grow. Over the last ten years, your task of offering "guidance and advice... as well as proposing the most appropriate measures for safeguarding minors and vulnerable persons" (Praedicate Evangelium, Art. 78) has expanded considerably. It has taken on a more defined shape, as I have asked you to focus on helping to make the Church an increasingly safe place for minors and vulnerable adults. I am happy to see that you are here today in large numbers, and to hear the updates on your activities. I encourage you to continue in this service with a team spirit, building bridges and networks that can make your care for others more effective.

You have devoted much time and effort to completing the Annual Report on Safeguarding Policies and Procedures in the Church, which I had asked you to prepare. This should not be just another document, but should help us better to appreciate the work that still lies ahead.

In confronting the scandal of abuse and the suffering of victims, we might well grow discouraged, since the challenge of restoring the fabric of broken lives and of healing pain is enormous and complex. Yet our commitment must not wane; indeed, I encourage you to move forward, so that the Church will be, always and everywhere, a place where everyone can feel at home and each person is

treated as sacred.

To carry out this service well, we must make Christ's feelings our own: his compassion, his way of touching the wounds of humanity, his Heart pierced with love for us. Jesus is the one who drew near to us; in his flesh, God the Father broke down every barrier and thus showed that he is close to us in all our needs and concerns. In Jesus, God has taken our sufferings upon himself and borne our wounds, as we read in the fourth song of the Suffering Servant in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (cf. 53:4). We, too, have come to realize this: we cannot help others to bear their burdens unless we shoulder them ourselves, unless we show genuine closeness and compassion.

In our ecclesial ministry of protecting minors, closeness to victims of abuse is no abstract concept, but a very concrete reality, comprised of listening, intervening, preventing and assisting. All of us, especially Church authorities, are called to acknowledge firsthand the impact of abuse and to be deeply moved by the suffering of victims, listening directly to their voices and showing a closeness that, through practical decisions, can lift them up, help them and prepare a different future for everyone.

Our response to those who have been abused is born of this loving gaze, this heartfelt closeness. These brothers and sisters of ours must be welcomed and listened to, since neglecting to do so can greatly aggravate their suffering. Ours must be a personal commitment to caring for them; at the same time, we need to do so with the help of competent collaborators.

Thank you for all that you are doing to accompany victims and survivors. Much of this service is carried out confidentially, as it should be, out of respect for those involved. At the same

time, its fruits ought to become visible. People should know and see how you are accompanying local Churches in their ministry of safeguarding minors. Your closeness will strengthen local ecclesial authorities to share best practices and verify that adequate measures have been taken. I have already asked you to ensure compliance with *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*, so that reliable means are in place for welcoming and caring for victims and survivors, as well as for ensuring that the experience and witness of these communities support the work of protection and prevention.

I know that your service to local Churches is already bearing much fruit. I am encouraged to see the Memorare initiative taking shape, in cooperation with Churches in many countries around the world. This is a very concrete way for the Commission to demonstrate its closeness to the leadership of these Churches as you work to strengthen existing efforts for prevention. In time, this will create a network of solidarity with victims and those who promote their rights, especially where resources and experience are limited.

Dear brothers and sisters, thank you for your sensitive and important service. Your observations will keep us moving in the right direction, so that the Church will continue to be fully committed to the prevention of abuse, its firm condemnation, the provision of compassionate care for victims and ongoing commitment to being a welcoming and safe place. Thank you for your perseverance and for the witness of hope that you offer. I bless you from my heart, I pray for you and I ask you, please, to pray for me.\*

*L'Osservatore Romano, Weekly Edition in English, Fifty-seventh year, number 10, Friday, 8 March 2024, p. 5.*

# Experiencing the sweetness of God's love

Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to participants in the course on the Internal Forum promoted by the Apostolic Penitentiary; held at the Clementine Hall, 8 March 2024

DEAR brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

I am pleased to meet you on the occasion of the annual Course on the Internal Forum, organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary. I address a cordial greeting to Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, major penitentiary, to the regent Monsignor Nykiel, to the prelates, the officials and staff of the Penitentiary, to the College of ordinary and extraordinary Penitentiaries of the Papal Basilicas in Rome, and to all of you participating in the course.

In the context of Lent and, in particular, in the Year of Prayer in preparation for the Jubilee, I would like to propose that you reflect together on a simple and rich prayer, which belongs to the heritage of the holy faithful People of God, and which we will recite during the rite of Reconciliation: the Act of Contrition.

Despite the somewhat old-fashioned language, which may even be misunderstood in some of its expressions, this prayer preserves all its validity, both pastoral and theological. Besides, its author is the great Saint Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori, master of moral theology, a pastor close to the people and a man of great equilibrium, distant from both rigorism and laxism.

I will dwell on three attitudes expressed in the Act of Contrition, which I think can help us reflect on our relationship with God's mercy: repentance before God, trust in him and the resolve not to relapse.

First: repentance. It is neither the fruit of self-analysis, nor of a psychic sense of guilt, but arises entirely from an awareness of our wretchedness in the face of God's infinite love and his boundless mercy. Indeed, it is this experience that moves our soul to ask him for forgiveness, confident in his fatherliness, as the prayer recites:

"O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee", and later adds, "because they offend Thee, my God, who art all good". In reality, in the person, the sense of sin is proportional precisely to the perception of God's infinite love: the more we feel his tenderness, the more we desire to be in full communion with him and the more the ugliness of evil in our life becomes apparent to us. And it is precisely this awareness, described as "repentance" or "contrition", that prompts us to reflect on ourselves and our deeds, and to convert. Let us remember that God never tires of forgiving us, and on our part, let us never tire of asking for forgiveness!

Second attitude: trust. In the Act of Contrition, God is described as "all good and deserving of all my love". It is beautiful to hear, on the lips of a penitent, the acknowledgment of both God's infinite goodness and his primacy, in one's own life, of love for him. To love "above all else" indeed means to place God at the center of everything, as the light on the path and the foundation for every order of values, entrusting everything to him. And this is a primacy that inspires every other love: for humanity and for creation, because he who loves God, loves his brother (cf. 1 Jn 4:19-21), and seeks his well-being, always, in justice and in peace.

Third aspect: resolve. It expresses the will of the penitent not to relapse into the sin committed (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1451), and enables the important passage from attrition to contrition, from imperfect to perfect suffering (cf. *ivi.*, 1452-1453). We manifest this attitude by saying, "I firmly resolve with the help of Thy grace to sin no more". These words express an intention, not a promise. Indeed, none of us can promise to God to sin no more, and what is required to receive forgiveness is not a guarantee of impeccability, but a current resolve,

made with a righteous intention at the moment of confession. Moreover, it is a commitment we always make with humility, as the words "with the help of Thy grace" emphasize. Saint John Mary Vianney, the Curé d'Ars, used to repeat that "God forgives us even though he knows we will sin again". And besides, without his grace, no conversion would be possible, against any temptation of Pelagianism, old or new.

Finally, I would like to draw your attention to the prayer's beautiful conclusion: "My God, have mercy". Here, the words "God" and "mercy" are like synonyms, and this is decisive! God is mercy (cf. 1 Jn 4:8), mercy is his name, his face. It is good for us to remember this, always: in every act of mercy, in every act of love, the face of God appears.

Dear friends, the task entrusted to you in the confessional is beautiful and crucial, because it enables you to help so many brothers and sisters to experience the sweetness of God's love. I encourage you, therefore, to live every confession as a unique and unrepeatable moment of grace, and to give the Lord's forgiveness generously, with affability, fatherliness and, I dare say, even with maternal tenderness.

I invite you to pray and to strive to ensure that this year of preparation for the Jubilee may see the Father's mercy flourish in many hearts and in many places, and so God may be ever more loved, recognized and praised.

I thank you for the apostolate you carry out—or which to some of you will soon be entrusted. May Our Lady, Mother of mercy, accompany you. I, too, keep you in my prayer, and I bless you from my heart. Please, do not forget to pray for me.\*

*L'Osservatore Romano, Weekly Edition in English, Fifty-seventh year, number 11, Friday, 15 March 2024, p. 15.*



Pope Francis meets with the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors in prayer at the Vatican on March 7, 2024. VATICAN MEDIA



Pope Francis with participants in this year's course on the Internal Forum, March 8, 2024. VATICAN MEDIA

Episcopal Commission on Doctrine of the Faith  
Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines

## CBCP ECDF position on Freemasonry and a note on Canon 1374 of the CIC

THE Philippine Hierarchy, as early as 1954 up until the present, has always maintained and defended the official Catholic (magisterial) position on the unacceptability of Masonry, given its serious errors both in doctrine (philosophical tenets) and practices. It has also sought to implement the provisions of Canon Law on penalties that Catholics incur by joining Masonry. Yet, given the sensitivity and *delicateness* of the issue in the Philippine setting, it has also shown "*openness*", in the exercise of pastoral circumspection, towards Catholics who may have unwittingly in good faith sought membership in Masonic associations with the best of intentions.

It is true that on two occasions, the CBCP acted in behalf of the Grand Lodge of the *Free and Accepted Masons of the Philippines* (FAMP) to petition the Holy See to reconsider its proscription of Freemasonry in the Philippines.

First, in 1967, when the Bishops received from FAMP a request to ask the Holy See to repeal its official proscription of Freemasonry (in the Philippines). On account of this, the bishops organized a dialogue in 1968, between Catholic experts and the Masons, the result of which urged the Bishops to at least reconsider the official Catholic position. In that dialogue, the Masons pointed out that they did not really hold communion with their masonic counterparts elsewhere in the world who were manifestly *anti Catholic*, stressing further that there was nothing essentially anti-Catholic in their constitution and that they were in fact fully committed to cooperate with the Catholic Church.

The Catholic experts, on the other hand, arrived at the conclusion that masonic lodges in the Philippines had been established more for fraternal and social purposes, and that masons in fact in the country wanted a new era of mutual cooperation with the Church. This persuaded the experts to propose that the bishops adopt a more favorable attitude towards the masons, while along the way that the Holy See be petitioned to lift the excommunication of Filipino Catholics who had become members of FAMP.

The CBCP acquiesced and petitioned the Holy See in 1970 to exempt from the provision of Canon 2335 the *first three masonic degrees* of the FAMP [read: not everyone of them nor the whole of FAMP]. Indeed, not that the bishops necessarily agreed with the arguments presented for it was understood that the exemption being sought would apply only to Catholics who, in the judgment of their Local Ordinaries, joined freemasonry in *good faith* [read again: otherwise, the excommunication stays]. Clearly, that stance did not remove from the minds of the bishops the objections that had been levelled against masonic beliefs, principles and practices.

Though not directly addressed to the Philippine Hierarchy, the circular letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) issued in 1974, served as a response. The circular called for a strict interpretation of CIC Canon 2335. Nonetheless, the same circular expressly laid down that the *excommunication imposed* by said canon *applies only to persons who are members of associations that militate against the Church*. In a clarificatory note that same year, the CDF stated: "*In accordance with the circular letter dated July 18, 1974, which recalls a strict interpretation of Canon 2335, the excommunication applies only to the persons who are members of associations that militate against the Church. It is on the basis of this principle that the position of the members of the different groups must be judged in each particular case.*" The statement clearly does not offer a blanket exoneration of all freemasons, but that *members of the different groups must be judged in each particular case*.

The second instance when the CBCP succumbed to another such request was when then CBCP President, *Archbishop S. Villegas*, sought to obtain a rescript from the Holy See to have members of FAMP exempted from the sanctions imposed by Canon 1374. It is not known on which grounds the exemption stood arguably justified, but just the same the response of the CDF, through then CDF Prefect, *Cardinal Gerhard Müller*, was negative. The CDF Prefect insisted that the Church's official position still stood and that it was not within the competence of the Episcopal Conference to decide on a matter the Holy See had already passed judgment on.

Lately, the CBCP's doctrinal commission, on February 20, 2023, expressed "pastoral openness" in its stance, in consideration of Catholics who may have joined freemasonry unwittingly, unsuspecting of its serious errors in matters of faith, doctrine and practice, and who may not have formally renounced their Catholic faith and thus continue to live it in practice.

How may this stance of "pastoral openness" be understood? The answer might be gleaned from the response of the *Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith* (DDF) to the inquiry of Bishop Julito Cortes of Dumaguete (Philippines), as to what could be the best pastoral approach to membership in Freemasonry by the Catholic Faithful. The DDF, citing its Declaration of 1983 and the CBCP's own guidelines of 2003, replied on November 13, 2023, to reiterate its judgment that "*active membership in Freemasonry by a member of the faithful is forbidden because of the irreconcilability between Catholic doctrine and Freemasonry.*" The position of the Holy See is thus firmly unchanged in that "*... those who are formally and knowingly enrolled in Masonic Lodges and have embraced Masonic principles fall under the provisions in the above-mentioned Declaration.*" Yet, implied in this statement is that there may be those who have not *formally and knowingly* embraced Masonic principles in spite of having



Masonic pendant. MAURO CATEB VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS (CC BY 3.0)

been initiated into the masonic association. This, however, cannot always be presupposed so that as a matter of policy, it should always be safe to heed the position in favor of the law.

Most recently, just when the Italian Cardinal, *Francesco Coccopalmero*, a former head of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, called for a "*permanent dialogue*" at the official level between Catholicism with freemasonry—apparently to improve relations—such an idea was immediately countered by *Bishop Antonio Staglianò*, President of the Pontifical Academy of Theology. During a conference in Milan on February 16, 2024, Cardinal Coccopalmero observed that "*an evolution in mutual understanding*" may have taken place over the last half-century between Catholicism and freemasonry, thereby suggesting that this might justify such a permanent dialogue. Bishop Staglianò, however, reiterated the *fundamental incompatibility between masonry and Catholicism*, thus rejecting even the possibility that the Holy See's position in regard to freemasonry might be evolving. Aside from referring to the masonic Arian view of Jesus, Bishop Staglianò pointed out that the Catholic concept of charity and solidarity, grounded in the sacrament of the love of God in Jesus, are more than just the masonic philanthropic practice and idea of secular fraternity. In the end, he restated the November 2023 Vatican ruling that membership in freemasonry by a member of the faithful is forbidden and that Catholics who join Masonic lodges are in a state of "grave sin" and may not receive communion.

The CBCP position, thereby, also remains unchanged in not only discouraging but also prohibiting the Catholic faithful from joining freemasonry, upholding as a consequence the provisions of Canon 1374 of the CIC.

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### A note on Canon 1374 of the CIC

What may be said of *Canon 1374* of the 1982 Code of Canon Law that replaced Canon 2335 of the 1917 Code of Canon Law? Canon 1374, unlike Canon 2335, does not mention any groups in its condemnation. It states: "A person who joins *an association which plots against the Church* is to be punished with a just *penalty*; one who promotes or takes office in such an association is to be punished with an *interdict*."

The question is: without *masonic associations* being singled out by the present Canon, may Catholics and Freemasons suppose that the prohibition on Catholics becoming members of these associations had thereby been relaxed? To answer this question, the CDF issued a declaration in 1983 that insisted that *nothing has changed* in the Church's position. The CDF clarified that the omission was simply meant to extend the application of the prohibition of membership to other associations, whose principles—like those of masonic associations—are perceived to be irreconcilable with the doctrine of the Church.

In other words, the *generic designation* (non-name-specific) used by Canon 1374, namely, "*an association which plots against the Church*", was meant to include "*all*" associations of such kind, and not necessarily to exclude any particular association that is obviously seen to fit the description. The "non-mention" does not mean "*exclusion*". The generic designation connotes "*inclusion*", rather than an indication of "*exclusion*".

MOST REV. JOSE R. ROJAS, D.D.  
Bishop of Libmanan  
Chairman, Episcopal Commission on Doctrine of the Faith  
10 March 2024

**EVERYDAY JESUS**

www.fathersoc.com

By ARCHBISHOP SOCRATES VILLEGAS

**Be gracious**

IN Grade 3, I learned a poem about good manners:

Hearts, like doors, will open with ease  
With very, very little keys.  
But don't forget that two of these  
Are thank you, sir, and if you please.

People who are grateful, people who know how to say thanks sincerely, win the hearts of people easily.

There were ten lepers. They were told to do something. They were healed along the way. The nine chose to be dutiful. They were obedient. What's wrong with that? The Lord told them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." They have not yet reached the priests and they got well. So they just said, "But the Lord told us to go and show ourselves to the priests. That is a duty. We are only obeying." The other leper chose not to merely obey but to be gracious, sweet, and thoughtful.

Don't get me wrong. I am not saying that we should disobey. I am not saying that we should be lax in our duties. What I am saying is that sometimes, we must recognize the importance of being gracious.

Even if we are doing our duties; it is important to smile when we fulfill a duty, it is important to pause a while sometimes and say "Thank You, Lord."

Sometimes, we take life too seriously. We fulfill one duty after another. We must not forget though these important keys to open the doors of people's hearts. We must be dutiful but not forget to be gracious. At the end of the day, it is the smile on your face, and the graciousness of your heart that will win love and respect.

Today, we will have many duties to fulfill. Let us make sure we don't sacrifice graciousness because we have so much to do.

**Silent God**

WE know the story of Job. He lost his children. He lost his property. He lost his herd of cows. He lost his beasts. He lost his house. He even lost his health. His whole body was covered with sores. He really suffered. Job prayed and asked God for help and asking God to explain. What was the response of God? Silence. God did not give him any answer. And yet what is striking about Job is that after praying and God met him with silence, he continued to believe that he will be vindicated. He believed that he will be declared innocent. He believed that through all this, God will prove that He loves Job. Even if God was silent, Job believed in God's goodness and providence.

We are so different from Job. For instance, if we talk to somebody and that person does not respond, we might say, "I'll talk to someone else." Or if we pray and ask God, and God seems quiet, then we just give up praying and say, "I give up, I'll try another time." But in the case of Job, he was so comfortable with the silence of God. Why? Silence is not only a sign of indifference. Silence is not only a sign of swearing. Silence is not only a sign of hostility. I am sure Job knew the silence that his wife offered him when they slept together tenderly at night. I am sure that Job had experienced the silence of the child snuggling around his neck. I am sure that Job had experienced the silence of a friend whose face lights up upon seeing him before that friend is even able to speak. That silence is powerful because that silence speaks of love that no words can express. We are a people becoming less and less comfortable with silence.

And when our loved ones keep quiet, we complain and say, "Bakit ang tahimik mo?" When our loved ones keep quiet, we say, "What is the problem?" Silence is not always a sign of problems. Silence is not always a sign of indifference. The most profound thoughts cannot be contained in words, but can only be contained in silence. When Job prayed and God was silent, he knew that it did not mean that God was not listening. Job knew that the meaning of that silence of God is "I AM HERE."

I believe in the sun even when the clouds hide it. I believe in love even in the midst of war. I believe in God even when He is silent.

**Pay it forward**

Reflection for Tuesday of the Third Week of Lent, Mt 18:21-35

By BISHOP PABLO VIRGILIO DAVID

TODAY'S Gospel reminds me of the old version of the Lord's Prayer. I am referring in particular to that part in the prayer that says "And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." The old version says, "And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." In Tagalog, "Patawarin mo ang aming mga utang, gaya ng pagpapatawad namin sa nagkakautang sa amin."

The line establishes the important connection between asking to be forgiven and being forgiving. Ano ang karapatan kong humingi ng tawad kung ako mismo hindi ako marunong magpatawad? What right do I have to seek forgiveness if I myself am so unforgiving?

In the Gospel, Jesus elaborates on this idea by telling his audience a parable about an unforgiving servant. He had been forgiven the

huge amount of money that he owed his master. And yet, when a fellow servant of his who owed him much less asked for some consideration—he responded by demanding an immediate repayment from him and having him imprisoned when he could not immediately pay back what he owed. Listen to what the master said to him, "You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant as I had pity on you?" If I were to translate this into Tagalog, instead of saying "Napakasama mong katulong!" I would probably have used the Tagalog expression "Napakawalang utang-na-loob mong katulong! Pinatawad kita dahil nagmakaawa ka. Hindi ka ba dapat naawa at nagpatawad sa iyong kapwa kung paanong

kinaawaan kita at pinatawad?"

It's very interesting how, in Tagalog, we switch from the literal to the figurative sense of indebtedness by just adding the word "loob" to the word "utang." From a literal UTANG to a figurative UTANG NA LOOB—a spiritual form of indebtedness that is unfortunately watered down by the English expression "Debt of gratitude." Utang na loob for us is more than a debt of gratitude.

The simplest way of putting it is: "Why should I expect to be forgiven if I myself choose to be so unforgiving?" This must be what Jesus meant when he said, "The measure with which you measure will be measured out to you." The Lord is not asking to be repaid for the debts we owe him. What he expects of us is the capacity to pay it forward.

**Thoughts to live by**

Reflections on 4th Sunday of Lent, March 10, 2024, Laetare Sunday

By CARDINAL ORLANDO B. QUEVEDO



1. A Brief Note on Laetare Sunday—"Laetare Jerusalem"—Rejoice, Jerusalem (Is. 66:10), the 1st words of the Introit (entrance verse) of today's Mass gives the name to the 4th Sunday of Lent. As in Gaudete Sunday in Advent, the use of rose-colored Mass vestment is allowed today. It is a day of hope with Easter at last within sight. It is exactly 21 days before Easter Sunday.

2. 1st Reading, 2 Chr. 36:14-16, 19-23—Verses 1-13 of 2 Chr. 36 narrates the idolatry and downfall of the Kings of Judah, Eliakim, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah, as well as the conquest and looting of Jerusalem by the Egyptian King Nebuchadnezzar.

3. "Likewise all the princes of Judah, the priests and the people added treachery to treachery, practicing all the abominations of the nations and defiling the Lord's house which he had consecrated in Jerusalem" (v. 14). The Lord sent prophets to warn them of disaster but the people mocked them. The Lord, therefore, brought up the Chaldean king, Nebuchadnezzar, who killed their young men in their own sanctuary, and delivered everyone to his power. He brought the treasures of the palace and of the Temple to Babylon. He burnt the house of God and the palaces and destroyed the walls of Jerusalem. Those who survived became his servants. All these fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah (vv. 15-21). Finally, the Lord charged Cyrus, the King of Persia, who was not a believer but a worshipper of Zoroaster, to be his agent (v. 22). "The Lord, the God of heaven ... charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem." Let all the people go up. "May their God be with them" (v. 23, see Ezra 1:1).

4. Nebuchadnezzar was the

greatest and longest-reigning king of the Babylonian dynasty (43 yrs., 605 BC - 562 BC). He initiated the Babylonian Captivity that ended in 539 BC, with his defeat by Cyrus the Great, King of Persia.

5. King Cyrus (ca. 600 BC - 530 BC; reigned for 29 yrs) is the founder of the 1st Persian Empire. He authorized the Decree of Restoration, which decreed the return of the captive Jews to Zion and the rebuilding of the Temple. Is.45:1 says that Cyrus was anointed by Yahweh for his role in behalf of the Jews. He is the only non-Jewish figure to be revered as an anointed servant of God.

6. Resp. Ps. 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6—A song of sorrow and longing by the Babylonian captives. "By the rivers of Babylon there we sat weeping when we remembered Zion... For there our captors asked us... 'Sing for us a song of Zion.' But how could we sing a song of the Lord in a foreign land?" (vv. 1-4). "If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget. May my tongue stick to my palate if I do not remember you, if I do not exalt Jerusalem beyond all my delights" (vv. 5-6).

7. 2nd Reading, Eph. 2:4-10—The Mercy of God in Christ. "God who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us (v. 4), even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ... (v. 5), raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus (v. 6), that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable reaches of his grace in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus (v. 7). For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God (v. 8); it is not from works, so no one may boast (v. 9). For we are his handiwork, created in Christ

Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them" (v. 10).

8. This very rich, but complex, two-sentence passage may be simplified. We were dead in sin, but God raised us to life with Christ and seated us in the heavens in Christ Jesus. Paul repeats his perennial doctrine—by grace we have been saved, not by works. It is God's gift.

9. Gospel, Jn. 3:14-21 Believing in God and living in the light—"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert (see Nm. 21:9), so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life" (vv. 14-15). "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life" (vv. 15-16). God did not send his Son to condemn the world but to save it (v. 17).

10. Whoever believes in him will not be condemned. But whoever does not believe in the name of the only Son of God has already been condemned (v. 18). "The light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works are evil." They hate the light, because the light would expose their wicked works (vv. 19-20). "But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as 'done in God' (v. 21).

11. Prayer—O God, through your Word you wonderfully reconcile the human race to yourself. Grant, we pray, that, with prompt devotion and eager faith, we may hasten toward the solemn celebrations to come. This we pray through Christ, your Word and our Lord and Savior. Amen. (The Collect of Laetare Sunday, modified).

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## Caritas Chronicles



**March 3, 2024—Caritas Philippines, in collaboration with Caritas Diocese of Libmanan and supported by Caritas Australia, engaged the community and local government in designing the Empowering Coastal Communities for Disaster Resiliency and Climate Change Adaptation (ECCORD) project.**

Through activities like Participatory Disaster Risk Assessment (PDRA), focus group discussions with various sectors (women, elders, people with disabilities, and organized groups), community visits, and key informant interviews (KIIs) with the local government unit (LGU), the project team is comprehensively assessing the challenges faced by the Municipality of Cabusao, Camarines Sur. Further community engagement activities will delve deeper into these challenges and explore potential solutions.



**March 4, 2024—Alay Kapwa Expanded Program in the Diocese of Virac.**

The Social Action Committee Head from every Barangay, Parish Pastoral Council President from every Vicariate, the Clergy of the Diocese of Virac, and Caritas Virac Justice & Peace, Inc. came together at the Risen Christ Chapel on March 2, 2024, for the Orientation on the Alay Kapwa Expanded Program and Social Action Works of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines - Caritas Philippines.

According to Rev. Fr. Carmelo "Tito" Caluag, Head of Caritas Philippines' Alay Kapwa Expanded Program, the goals of the Alay Kapwa Expanded Program are: 1. Overall sustainability, replicability, and scalability of the Seven Legacy Programs. 2. To have at least one Legacy Program in each of the 86 Dioceses. 3. Establish an Alay Kapwa Expanded Fund, an Annual-Giving Fund from 1 million people.



**March 5, 2024—The Caritas LaUnion Dsac's Alay Kapwa para sa Kalusugan.**

PaMEALya Program caters to mothers and children. Mothers can attend catechism classes while their children participate in separate sessions. Families reunite afterward to receive their food rations, which include a popular local dish similar to Bicol Express, featuring pork, chilies, and sigarilyas (winged beans) cooked in coconut milk.



**March 6, 2024—Lay leaders from St. Michael the Archangel Parish in Monreal, Masbate, participated in the Basic Orientation and Workshop on Safeguarding Minors (BOWS) hosted by Caritas Masbate Social Action.**

The workshop aimed to equip them with knowledge about the risks children face in various settings, including schools, communities, homes, and even churches.

The two-day workshop empowered them to draft parish-level guidelines for a safer church. #TeamCaritasMasbate is also pleased to see the active participation of youth leaders in Monreal, ensuring their voices are heard in our increasingly synodal church.



**March 6, 2024—62 priests from the Diocese of Bacolod welcomed the expanded Alay Kapwa program led by Fr. Tito Caluag during their March 5th recollection at the Sacred Heart Seminary in Bacolod City. The priests valued the donor management system, ensuring genuine care for contributors to Caritas Philippines' 7 legacy programs.**

Caritas Bacolod Director, Fr. Julius Espinosa, acknowledged the campaign's importance for supporting social action centers. Msgr. Rolando Quijano, Vicar General, expressed gratitude for the orientation and committed the clergy and communities to fully support Alay Kapwa.



**March 6, 2024—Alay Kapwa para sa Karunungan Educational Assistance Program (EAP) scholars, led by SAC Ozamis program coordinator Mrs. Yasmin Ruste, attended a talk on "The Five Languages of Love" at St. Vincent High School in Bonifacio, Misamis Occidental on March 3, 2024. Our thanks to the speakers, Sr. Hazel Enguito and Sr. Hazel Talaba.**



**March 8, 2024—Alay Kapwa para sa Kalusugan - PaMEALya families in Villa Lucia, Masbate City just received training on backyard vermicomposting. Not only are the families learning proper solid waste management, but they also realize that market waste dumped in the city landfill can become a source of additional household income if they venture into biofertilizer production.**

Waste can still be an asset, after all. What goes around, comes around—with extra income.



**March 9, 2024—Six months following Typhoon Egay, Caritas Philippines, alongside Caritas Nueva Segovia and the Roman Catholic Diocese Of Laoag revisited families who received shelter repair kits. The initiative was supported by the Embassy of Israel, our partner in the past humanitarian response.**

Celebrating International Women's Day, the visit also highlighted the crucial role of women - staff, volunteers, and those who shape our society.



**IN PHOTOS:**  
**New Shepherd promises a diocese that “walks side by side” with the people**

IN his first mass as the bishop of the Diocese of Alaminos, newly installed bishop Napoleon Sipalay emphasized that building the Church concerns not only bishops, priests and the religious, but all the baptized.

These photos capture the vibrant spirit of unity and

devotion as Bishop Napoleon Sipalay assumes his role as shepherd of the Diocese of Alaminos. From the solemnity of the installation ceremony to the joyous embraces of parishioners, each image reflects a community bound together by faith and a shared commitment to walk side by side with their new bishop.

Photos by CBCP News

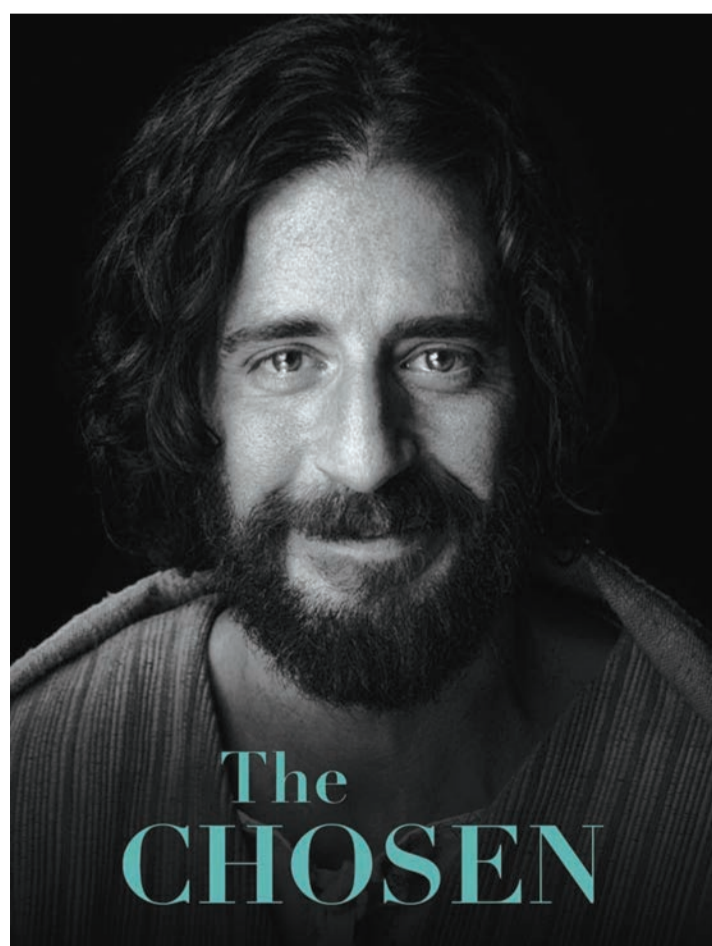


**CBCP CINEMA**

**Movie Reviews**



**The Chosen**



*This crowd-funded faith based production has earned its place as a must-watch series for audiences seeking inspiration and connection.*

DURING Lent, many like to watch *The Chosen* — some for the nth time — not only because it’s “the seasonal thing to do,” but also because it can put one on reflection mode, and possibly revitalize one’s faith. *The Chosen* — which is touted as the most watched faith-based TV series in history with close to 400 million views up

to Season 3 — is a remarkable production from Angel Studio that breathes new life into biblical storytelling. Fired by an evangelical spirit and strength of conviction, its creators have made it watchable online for free since its inception. And now it’s on Netflix.

Many things set it apart from the television/movie industry,

foremost of which is its ground-breaking approach to production. *The Chosen* is not your garden-variety Hollywood blockbuster produced by moviedom’s moguls — it is crowd-funded, moving from episode to episode, through season to season, on a life force coming from a passionate audience.

*The Chosen* offers a fresh perspective on familiar biblical narratives, an immersive storytelling that makes the series accessible and relatable to modern and younger audiences. By its popularity it seems it is filling a need in a generation that secretly yearns for God while rejecting the God they have known from their elders.

What is truly new and innovative in *The Chosen* is the imaginatively crafted background stories — invented, yes, inspired even — that are intended to enrich the Bible material by offering context, depth, and explanations to fill story-telling gaps in the Gospels. When one reads the Bible questions may come to mind, for instance: What did Jesus and His disciples do during their free time? What happened to that woman after she was rid of seven devils? Did Jesus ever smile? Or laugh? Or trade jokes? What would His followers fight over, and how would fights be settled?

Thus *The Chosen* boldly takes us behind the scenes, so to speak, giving us engaging side stories involving His disciples and their families, helping us

appreciate what life must have been during those times when Jesus and His disciples walked the earth. One example of such stories is the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law. In Matthew 8:14-15 the miracle is over in two verses. In *The Chosen* are shown the events leading up to it — the tension between Peter and his wife Eden, her brothers’ anxiety that their mother might be dying, et al — and what happens with her after Jesus’s healing touch. (She could give *Wonder Woman* a run for her money).

*The Chosen* director and co-creator Dallas Jenkins stresses that this use of creative license aims to enhance understanding, engagement, and emotional resonance with the biblical narratives while remaining faithful to the core teachings and messages of the Gospels. Theologians and Scriptures experts would observe that, indeed, *The Chosen* upholds the integrity of the Bible and does not attempt to introduce new or contradictory teaching to the series.

Then there’s the cast of relative unknowns whose convicted portrayals of their roles lend life and humanity behind the biblical figures — Jesus, His disciples, — all whose lives they touch — allowing viewers to connect with their struggles, triumphs, and spiritual journeys on a deeper level.

Somehow the series dares to introduce the audience to biblical characters that are “different” — beginning with an accessible Jesus (played

by Jonathan Roumie), and followed by His disciples, ordinary working class guys with their own dreams, hopes, and issues. Jenkins must have known that using A-list actors would have been a colossal mistake. Imagine what the outcome would be with Leonardo di Caprio playing Jesus and Robert Downey Jr. playing Peter!

While *The Chosen* actors may not be widely recognized, Jenkins prioritizes finding individuals who can authentically embody the essence of the biblical figures they portray. Rather than relying solely on fame or star power, Jenkins and his casting team focus on selecting actors who possess the right blend of skill, passion, and emotional depth to bring the characters to life. By choosing authenticity and emotional resonance over celebrity status, Jenkins ensures that each actor is perfectly cast for their role, enabling them to deliver nuanced and impactful performances. (Speaking of perfectly cast, note that *The Chosen*’s Jesus is not white, blonde, and blue-eyed).

Jenkins also reveals in his many interviews that he encourages actors to bring their unique insights and interpretations to their characters. Considering that key players come from different religious persuasions — Jenkins the director is Evangelical Christian, Jonathan Roumie (Jesus) is Roman Catholic, Shahar Isaac (Simon) is Jewish, Elizabeth Tabish (Mary

Magdalene) grew up Catholic and is still moved to tears when she enters a Catholic cathedral or a church with uplifting images of Saints), Paras Patel (Matthew) grew up Hindi, and Erick Avari (Nicodemus) follows Zoroastrianism, etc. — this synergy allows for a rich and dynamic portrayal that captures the essence of the biblical narrative. The result of this open-minded collaboration is an exquisite tapestry woven from different threads bound together by a shared passion for bringing the stories of Jesus and His disciples to life, to accurately tell the Christian message in a compelling and authentic way.

Overall, the show is an inspired production that allows audiences to imagine what it must have been like for the people who knew Jesus during the 1st century. In an era where traditional portrayals may feel distant, *The Chosen* bridges the gap between ancient tales and contemporary sensibilities, inviting viewers — believers and non-believers alike — to engage with timeless truths, earning its place as a must-watch series for audiences seeking inspiration and connection.

CINEMA gently reminds one and all that no matter how deeply *The Chosen* tugs at your soul, don’t let it replace the Scriptures in your faith life. Go ahead and watch it, love it, swoon over it, shout to the world about it, but let it not lead you to idolatry. *The Chosen* may be inspired fiction, but only fiction just the same — man made, and therefore not infallible.