



CBCP Pastoral Letter for the 2021 Year of *Missio Ad Gentes* Becoming Jesus' Missionary Disciples

Dearly Beloved People of God,

The Philippine Church rejoices as it enters a national celebration of the 500 Years of Christianity in our treasured homeland. Five centuries ago we received the marvelous gift of the Christian faith; our hearts overflow with joy and gratitude. Why of all the nations and peoples in Asia was the Philippines chosen by God to be among the first to receive this precious gift? The clear answer is simply this: God's magnanimous, overflowing love.

We recall what God told his people Israel regarding his choice: "It was not because you are the largest of all nations that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you, for you are really the smallest of all nations. It was because the Lord loved you and because of his fidelity..." (Dt 7:7-8). Only God's freely given love can illuminate the choice of the Filipino people to receive this valuable gift of faith!

The Christian faith arrived and prospered in our land through the dedication and heroic sacrifices of thousands of men and women missionaries from various parts of the world. They treasured the gift of faith they had received and desired to share this gift with others. As the theme chosen by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) for this fifth centennial notes: all Christians are "gifted to give." This "giftedness" motivated generous missionaries over the centuries; it must also enflame the hearts of all of us today to engage in mission here at home and in other countries (*missio ad gentes*). Indeed, this is part of Jesus' mission mandate to his disciples: "What you have received as a gift, give as a gift" (Mt 10:8). We pray for a *missionary renewal* of our Church—both at home (*ad intra*) and beyond our borders (*ad extra*) during our celebration of the 500 years—and into the future!

Missionary Transformation. Our beloved Pope Francis, who visited us in 2015, is committed to the missionary renewal of the entire Church; we can take inspiration from his document *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*). He asserts that we need an "evangelizing Church that comes out of herself," not a Church that is "self-referential" and "lives within herself, of herself, for herself" (cf. EG 20-24). Francis says: "I dream of a 'missionary option,' that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation.... All renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion" (EG 27). We seek to renew our mission enthusiasm here at home as well as *missio ad gentes*, mission to other nations and peoples.

Pope Francis continues: "Missionary outreach is *paradigmatic for all the Church's activity*.... We need to move 'from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry'" (EG 15). "I want to emphasize that what I am trying to express here has programmatic significance and important consequences....

Throughout the world, let us be ‘permanently in a state of mission’” (EG 25). We must seek to “put all things in a missionary key” (EG 34). We recall the challenge of Pope John Paul II during his 1981 visit to our Church: “I wish to tell you of my special desire: that the Filipinos will become the foremost missionaries of the Church in Asia.” This is a clear invitation to engage in *missio ad gentes*!

Pope Francis’ insights about Church missionary renewal come from his deep personal relationship with Christ. He writes: “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ.... I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day” (EG 3). A pivotal insight of Pope Francis is that “we are all missionary disciples” (EG 119); through baptism, “all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples” (EG 120). All Christians are “agents of evangelization.” Missionary evangelization “calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized.... Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries,’ but rather that we are always ‘missionary disciples’” (EG 120).

Joy: A Convincing Sign. For Pope Francis, salvation history is a “great stream of joy” (EG 5) which we must also enter. Let the joy of faith be revived, because God’s mercies never end (cf. EG 6). Unfortunately, “there are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter” (EG 6). “An evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral” (EG 10). We must *not* become “querulous and disillusioned pessimists, ‘sourpusses’” (EG 85). “May the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the good news not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ (EG 10; cf. EN 75). We all must *not* “end up stifling the joy of mission” (EG 79), both here at home and in other lands!

Mercy: Today’s Pathway in Mission. Pope Francis continually insists that mercy is the very essence of God. In his *Misericordiae Vultus (The Face of Mercy)* Francis expresses it this way: *mercy is God’s identity card*. He says: “We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace.... Mercy [is] the bridge that connects God and man” (MV 2). Francis quotes Saint Thomas Aquinas, who asserts that “mercy is the greatest of all virtues; ... all the others revolve around it ... it is proper to God to have mercy” (EG 37). “Mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy. The Church’s very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love” (MV 10).

“The Church is commissioned to announce the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel, which in its own way must penetrate the heart and mind of every person.... As the Church is charged with the task of the new evangelization, the theme of mercy needs to be proposed again and again with new enthusiasm and renewed pastoral action.... In our parishes, communities, associations and movements, in a word, wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy” (MV 12).

Conclusion. Pope Francis' profound thoughts on *missionary renewal, joy, and mercy* provide a solid compass to guide us as individuals and communities during our 500-years celebration and in the year 2021 which is dedicated to *missio ad gentes* (mission to all peoples). With Pope Francis we ask two graces of the Lord: "Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary vigor" (EG 109). "Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary enthusiasm" (EG 80). We remain constant in prayer, asking our two canonized "foreign" missionary saints, Lorenzo Ruiz and Pedro Calungsod, to intercede for us so that our loving God will always abundantly bless our Church in the Philippines and all her many missionary endeavors!

For the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Romulo G. Valles", with a cross symbol to its left.

+ ROMULO G. VALLES, D.D.

Archbishop of Davao

President, Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines

29 November 2020

First Sunday of Advent